

**Poverty and the Life Cycle in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland: Changing Experiences of Childhood, Education and the Transition to Adulthood**

Jane Gray

Department of Sociology and National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis

[Jane.Gray@nuim.ie](mailto:Jane.Gray@nuim.ie)

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## Abstract

This study adds to the evidence base on poverty and the life cycle from a childhood centred perspective through a qualitative analysis of a major new database of life history interviews linked to a panel survey. The analysis focused on three birth cohorts of respondents whose households experienced difficulty making ends meet when they were growing up during the 1930s, 1950s and 1970s. Experiences of class discrimination in education were most pronounced in the middle cohort who 'started out' during a period of transformation in the Irish social structure. For all three cohorts, vulnerability to poverty across the life course was linked to different patterns of 'poor fit' between the timing of key transitions in early adulthood and changing socio-economic and policy environments. The analysis demonstrates that a life cycle approach to social policy must be sufficiently flexible to respond to rapidly changing socio-economic conditions. Within the context of a long-term pattern of change in the timing and sequencing of early adult life transitions, fluctuations in the wider social and economic environment have varying consequences for people at different life stages. A life-cycle approach should also continue to recognise the substantial ways in which social class differences, especially those experienced in childhood and 'starting out,' frame opportunities and constraints at 'turning points' throughout the life course.

**Key words:** life cycle perspective; qualitative life history analysis; twentieth century

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## 1 Introduction

Following the report from the National Economic and Social Council, *The Developmental Welfare State* (NESC 2005), and the subsequent adoption of a life cycle approach to social policy under *Towards 2016* (Department of the Taoiseach 2006), there has been increased interest in monitoring the risk of poverty faced by people at different life stages. As Whelan and Maître (2008a) explained, social policy analysts have renewed their interest in the life cycle in response to the perception that people's lives have become increasingly 'de-standardised' in a globalising world. People are thought to be exposed to 'new risks' as increased demands for adaptability and flexibility in their working lives dovetail with changing patterns of family formation, especially at that stage of the life cycle when they are entering and establishing themselves in the labour market, and building their families.

Considerable **quantitative** evidence is now available on the extent to which life cycle factors explain patterns of poverty in contemporary Ireland (Layte and Whelan 2002; Nolan et al. 2006; Whelan and Maître 2008a; 2008b). These studies have shown that, while growing up in poor households increases the risk that people will experience poverty later in their lives, the transition to early adulthood represents a critical 'turning point' at which most people leave poverty behind. They have also demonstrated the continuing importance of social class for predicting variations in exposure to poverty at all life cycle stages.

This study adds to that evidence base through a retrospective, **qualitative** analysis of the childhood experiences and life trajectories of individuals who grew up during different historical periods. It draws on a new database of life histories, collected under the auspices of the 'Life Histories and Social Change Project' (LHSC) from more than one hundred respondents who had previously taken part in the 'Living in Ireland' (LII) survey carried out in each year from 1994 to 2001.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The present author was joint Principal Investigator on the 'Life Histories and Social Change Project' with Professor Seán Ó Riain. Dr Aileen O'Carroll was the Post-Doctoral Researcher for

The LHSC respondents were drawn from three birth cohorts: those born before 1935, between 1945 and 1954, and between 1965 and 1974.

In analysing the qualitative LHSC data for this paper I aimed to build on existing quantitative scholarship by meeting two objectives:

1. By examining patterns of continuity and change in memories of education and the transition to early adulthood amongst people who grew up in poor households during different historical **periods**;
2. By elucidating variations in the pattern of early life transitions leading to vulnerability to poverty in adulthood across different birth **cohorts**.

The findings emphasise the extent to which both subjective experiences of 'starting out' in life, and the objective significance of the timing of particular 'turning points' in early adulthood, varied according to changing life course patterns in different socio-historical contexts. They have important implications for our understanding of the context in which a 'life cycle' approach to social policy has emerged, and also for the form in which such an approach might best be introduced.

This research working paper is structured as follows. In the next chapter I provide an overview of the scholarly literature that forms the background to contemporary interest in the life cycle approach, and show the extent to which quantitative longitudinal research has problematised some of the empirical assumptions underlying this approach, including in Ireland. I then describe the contribution that qualitative life course research can make towards understanding the changing dynamics of poverty across individual lives. Chapter three provides a detailed account of the methodological strategy adopted in this study. In chapter four I present an in-depth thematic analysis of subjective memories of growing up and

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the project. The 'Living in Ireland' survey was carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) as part of the European Community Household Panel (ECHP). For further details see Chapter 3 of this report.

'starting out' in different historical periods, and show how changing demographic, socio-economic and policy contexts impacted on those experiences. Chapter five presents a more formal comparative analysis of how the nature and timing of the transition to early adulthood affected the individual life paths of people from different birth cohorts, who were exposed to income poverty as adults. In Chapter six I summarise the research findings and propose some key policy recommendations arising from the study.



## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 The modern life course: from institutionalisation to individualisation?

The focus on the 'life cycle' contained within the idea of the developmental welfare state requires a firm empirical understanding of how life paths have evolved and changed over time. Sociologists now generally use the term 'life course' (in preference to terms such as 'life cycle' or 'life span') in order to emphasise the extent to which the social significance of biographical time varies across different contexts, including socio-historical time. Research informed by a life course perspective examines the interplay between changing life trajectories and long-term societal trends, at both macro and micro levels of analysis, deploying both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies (Giele and Elder 1998: 5-28; Elder and Giele 2009: 1-24). The perspective has been described as both 'developmental and historical by its very nature' (Hareven 1994: 439).

During the 1980s, research on the life course emphasised the part played by the modern state in the **institutionalisation** of a normative life path: 'the evolution, during the last two centuries, of an institutional program regulating one's movement through life both in terms of a sequence of positions and in terms of a set of biographical orientations by which to organise one's experiences and plans' (Kohli 2007: 255). In other words, modern political and economic systems caused people to lead (and to expect to lead) increasingly **standardised** lives through the imposition of norms and rules linked to chronological age – by introducing laws surrounding school attendance and retirement age, for example.

More recently, however, there has been growing interest in the idea that a shift towards **de-standardisation** has occurred in the context of globalisation, as more fragmented and discontinuous work life patterns replace continuous full-

time employment for men, and as family forms become more heterogeneous. Some authors have extended these ideas to argue that we are living in a new social era of **individualisation**. People can no longer rely on 'functional' models of behaviour and action, so everyday life becomes a permanent 'do-it-yourself' project' (Beck-Gernsheim 1998), and social identities based on group membership – such as social class – become less relevant as people 'make up' their own biographies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

Empirical evidence on the de-standardisation of the life course is, however, ambivalent at best. Thus, in an analysis of data from the German Life History Study, Bruckner and Mayer (2005) found some support for the de-standardisation hypothesis with respect to family formation in West Germany, but not with respect to education, training and work. There appear to be considerable variations in the extent to which 'patchwork careers' have become more prevalent for men in different welfare-state systems, with the greatest evidence for de-standardisation appearing in the 'Anglo-Saxon' regimes (Kohli 2007). With respect to family life, cross-national studies find, in most countries, considerable continuity over time in the degree of 'partnership commitment' (Kohli 2007) and in the likelihood that children will spend most of their childhood years living with both parents (Andersson 2002).

In a comparative analysis of the transition to adulthood in nine European countries, Billari and Wilson (2001: 13) found no evidence of a pattern of convergence towards increased individualisation. Instead, 'the results suggest ... surprisingly stable national patterns in the transition to adult life.' Elchardus and Smits (2006) similarly found no evidence that there has been an **ideational** shift away from the notion of a 'normal' life course. In Belgium, 'an ideal life course still exists, which is characterised by an unambiguous sequential order and a surprisingly strict timing of the transitions,' to the extent that, '[t]he thesis of the destructureation or individualisation of the life cycle seems in fact so far removed

from reality that one can but raise the question of why it is so popular and so readily believed' (Elchardus and Smits 2006: 321-322).

Rather than arguing that there has been a radical shift towards 'de-standardisation' of the life course, it may be more accurate to state that the tightly sequenced set of early life course transitions that prevailed in most Western societies in the 1950s and 1960s has become 'unbundled' (Plane et al. 2005), leading to a prolongation of the phase of 'early adulthood' when people strive to attain the degree of economic security necessary to support a family (Furstenberg et al. 2004). During this life course phase, young people must 'manage' uncertainty and delay, and those with greater financial and social resources are better able to do so (Settersten 2007).

In Ireland, the timing of these trends may be somewhat different from that in other developed countries, although the general direction is similar. Halpin and Chan (2003: 478-479) noted that the time-gap between leaving school and getting married was much wider in Ireland than in Britain during the 1960s because average age at marriage was considerably higher in Ireland, and free universal secondary education was not introduced here until 1967. Thereafter, as the gap widened in Britain due to increasing postponement of marriage, in Ireland it continued to narrow through the late 1970s as average age at marriage declined further and participation rates in post-primary education continued to increase.

Hannan and Ó Riain (1993: 71) found that the period of transition from school to marriage averaged about nine years for men and six years for women in the mid-1980s, and that 'a "normal" or majority pattern of integration into adult life [existed] for over 90 per cent of young people at least up to age 22' (Hannan and Ó Riain 1993: 223). Since then, average age at marriage has continued to increase – reverting to the high levels of the 1940s by 2002 (Fahey 2007: 24) – and participation rates in higher education have more than doubled (Clancy

2007: 113). However, whereas Hannan and Ó Riain (1993: 69) found a close association between marriage and establishing a separate household in 1987, rates of pre-marital cohabitation increased during the 1990s; Halpin and O'Donoghue (2004: 8) found that over 40 per cent of new marriages in the period from 1994 to 2001 were preceded by cohabitation. Furthermore, the dramatic increase in the rate of births outside marriage since the 1980s – with some levelling off since 2000 (Fahey and Layte 2007: 166) – indicates that the sequencing of marriage and family formation has become more variable.

These trends towards increased variability in the timing and sequencing of early adult life transitions must be placed in the context of a longer trend towards greater **predictability** across the life course, as improvements in mortality and morbidity, together with a greater capacity to control fertility, make it increasingly possible for people to **plan** their lives (Settersten 2007: 254). Ireland witnessed significant improvements in life expectancy across the twentieth century, with the most dramatic period increases occurring between the mid-1940s and mid-1960s (CSO 2009). While fertility had been diminishing steadily since the 1930s, the total period fertility rate declined rapidly from the 1970s onwards, as women began to plan, and then increasingly to postpone, childbearing (Fahey and Layte 2007: 162-166). Completed fertility declined from 3.04 for the cohort of women born in 1950, to 2.19 for the cohort born in 1965. The average age at first childbirth increased from around 25 to 28 years of age for the same cohorts of women (Council of Europe 2002).

In summary, there is some support for the idea that the transition to full adulthood became more prolonged, and that the sequencing of some key transition events became less structured in Ireland in the last two decades of the twentieth century. However, this must be placed against the evidence that the transition was rather long (and in some respects less predictable) during the first half of the century – in any case for those who did not emigrate – and that this pattern lasted at least through the 1950s. According to Settersten (2007: 254), while

there is a resemblance between the transition to adulthood in the contemporary United States and that in the era prior to industrialisation, social institutions outside the family (such as education) now play a much greater part in shaping early adulthood, and globalisation has created new (rather than more) uncertainties. We might also add that these new uncertainties have emerged in a world where people are **expected** to exercise choice and control in their lives, but where social inequalities continue to mean that some people have fewer choices, and fewer resources to draw on than others, when making choices (Settersten 2007: 255).

## **2.2 Examining poverty from a life course perspective**

The perception that changing life trajectories under globalisation have led to the emergence of 'new risks' dovetails with an emerging emphasis on the need to re-orient social policy towards flexibility and the individualisation of responsibility.<sup>2</sup> The NESO (2005: 226) report, *The Developmental Welfare State*, argued that 'At each [life cycle] stage, the hazards and risks which confront the individual person have specific features and the individual has characteristic capabilities and constraints in facing them.' As we have seen, however, the empirical literature on the extent and form of 'new' risks associated with changes in the life course remains ambivalent.

Through detailed quantitative analyses of survey data from the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) and EU-SILC, Layte and Whelan (2002) and Whelan and Maître (2008a) demonstrated that, while there are enhanced risks of poverty and deprivation associated with specific life cycle 'stages' (especially in childhood, as a lone parent, and living alone in old age), more traditional factors, such as level of education and social class, continue to explain a substantial part of the variation in exposure to poverty and deprivation at all life

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<sup>2</sup> The literature is discussed comprehensively in Layte and Whelan (2002) and Whelan and Maître (2008a and 2008b).

cycle stages (except in lone parenthood). While childhood continues to carry a relatively high risk of poverty, the transition to early adulthood represents a key 'turning point' in the individual life course at which people are likely to emerge into low-risk phases, unless they are affected by adverse socio-economic circumstances (Whelan and Maître 2008a: 201).

Whelan and Maître's analyses were based on cross-sectional life cycle data constructed by classifying respondents according to their age and family status at the time of the survey, rather than a 'full-blown life cycle perspective' (Whelan and Maître 2008b: 136). This meant that they were constrained in their capacity to trace the intersections amongst lives and historical times, or to examine how individual lives unfolded over time – core principles of the life course paradigm (see Elder 1994: 5-6). Quantitative analysis meeting these objectives would have required 'longitudinal data requirements that go well beyond anything that is currently available in the Irish situation' (Whelan and Maître 2008b: 136).

The LHSC database provides an excellent opportunity for a complementary, qualitative analysis of how changing life patterns have intersected with experiences of poverty in different historical contexts. In his classic statement on the life course paradigm, Elder (1994: 5-6) identified four central themes: (1) the extent to which differences in birth year expose individuals to different 'historical worlds, with their constraints and options'; (2) the 'goodness of fit' between the timing of life course events, social timing and historical change; (3) how interdependent relationships with others are expressed and experienced across the life span; and (4) the exercise of human agency in planning individual lives and making choices among options that construct the life course. A number of authors have argued that, in addressing these themes, qualitative life stories can provide an important complement to quantitative data.

Quantitative data are limited in their treatment of human agency. According to Heinz (2003: 74),

While longitudinal quantitative life-course research focuses on the macrosocial dimensions of the timing and sequencing of life events that influences the social-status configurations of cohort members, it has difficulty illuminating the individuals' decision-making processes concerning pathways, opportunities, and institutionally defined options.

Millar (2007) argued that **qualitative** life course research has the potential to enhance our understanding of the dynamics of poverty by shedding light on the subjective experience of key transitions, by exploring how people manage or adapt to spells of poverty of different duration, and by identifying and elucidating the strategies behind different life trajectories. In this respect, qualitative approaches may be better placed to understand life course spells and transitions as integrated components of complex whole lives that unfold in changing historical contexts, thereby contributing to the objective of developing a person-centred approach to social policy (NESC 2005: 208). By examining life narratives as cases, it becomes possible to attain a more comprehensive understanding of the similarities and differences amongst life trajectories in sociologically relevant categories (Giele 2009).

In summary, qualitative data provide an understanding of what 'lies behind' (Millar 2007) changing life trajectories, and can help to generate new hypotheses for quantitative longitudinal studies. This study draws on data collected under a retrospective research design (see Scott and Alwin 1998) in order to elucidate similarities and differences in the experiences of those who grew up in poor households in different historical periods, and in the pattern of early life transitions leading to continued exposure to poverty in adulthood across different birth cohorts. While prospective longitudinal data (such as that currently being collected under the 'Growing Up in Ireland' study and 'The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing') will help us to understand the unfolding of life cycle processes in the future, retrospective data collection and analyses are essential if we are to understand how different life paths and poverty dynamics evolved in the past, in

order to ask better questions about their evolution in the future. In the next section, I provide a detailed account of the research methodology deployed in the study.



### 3 Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Data

The analysis in this paper is based on data collected under my supervision, jointly with Professor Seán Ó Riain (as co-principal investigators), for the project on 'Life Histories and Social Change in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland' (LHSC) at NUI Maynooth (<http://sociology.nuim.ie/lifehistory.shtml>).<sup>3</sup> The database comprises 113 life story interviews, life history calendars, and simple retrospective social network schedules. The respondents were selected from the sample of people who took part in all eight waves of the 'Living in Ireland Survey' (LII), a national panel study conducted each year between 1994 and 2001.<sup>4</sup> The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) Survey Unit wrote, on our behalf, to LII respondents from three birth cohorts – those born before 1935, between 1945 and 1954, and between 1965 and 1974 – inviting them to opt in to our study.

In selecting respondents to interview, we aimed to ensure that our sample was distributed proportionally across gender and social class categories, according to their representative distribution in the 'Living in Ireland' sample. In order to help us maximise the response rate of under-represented groups, the ESRI Survey Unit wrote to all respondents in each cohort twice, and a further two times to those in the youngest cohort, where problems of non-response were most acute. Ultimately, thirty-eight respondents from the youngest birth cohort opted in to the study, but subsequently ten of these either withdrew or could not be contacted despite multiple attempts.

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<sup>3</sup> The Life Histories and Social Change Project was funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences. We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Economic and Social Research Institute who corresponded with respondents to the Living in Ireland Survey on our behalf. This indirect approach was necessary, given the requirements of the Data Protection Act. This working paper represents an initial output from that project. In-depth analysis of the data is ongoing, and further outputs are projected. Subsequently, the data will be made available for re-use through the Irish Qualitative Data Archive ([www.iqda.ie](http://www.iqda.ie)).

<sup>4</sup> As part of the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) survey.

Table 3.1 Experience of income poverty (below 60 per cent median income) in any year 1994-2001

Birth Cohort	Living in Ireland Sample (Waves 1-8)	Life Histories and Social Change Sample	
	Percentage ever poor	Number ever poor	Percentage ever poor
<=1934	60.8	18	41.9
1945-1954	38.5	8	19.0
1965-1974	32.9	6	21.4

Our final sample consisted of forty-three people in the first cohort, forty-two in the second, and twenty-eight in the third. The distribution of respondents by gender is largely proportional to that in the Living in Ireland sample, although men are under-represented in the youngest cohort (8 of 28). There is a general tendency across each cohort for those in the professional and managerial social class categories to be over-represented in our sample, whilst those in the unskilled manual class category are under-represented. Table 3.1 shows that those who experienced income poverty in any of the 'Living in Ireland' study waves from 1994 to 2001 are proportionally under-represented in the 'Life Histories and Social Change' database.

Despite these unavoidable limitations, a sufficient number of respondents were interviewed for the purposes of qualitative analysis, even in the under-represented groups described above. Moreover, by drawing our respondents from a statistically representative quantitative sample, we can make more robust estimates of the likely biases in our study than is normally the case in qualitative research, because we are able to compare our respondents with their peers on a wide range of indicators, as in the table above.

### 3.2 Selection of Cases

In carrying out this analysis for the Combat Poverty Agency, I had two objectives:

- (1) to examine the changing experience of childhood poverty in different historical **periods**, and
- (2) to explore the pathways through which the experience of poverty in childhood may have impacted on adult risk of poverty in different birth **cohorts**.

In order to select cases for analysis, I drew on an existing study of the dynamics of child poverty based on the LII data, carried out for the Combat Poverty Agency by Nolan et al. (2006: 121-149). This study established that childhood socio-economic circumstances were strongly related to exposure to income poverty in adulthood. The authors identified two key variables: the financial circumstances of the family when an individual was growing up (as indicated by their response to a question on the difficulty their households experienced in 'making ends meet'), and the highest level of education achieved by their parents (father or mother, whichever was highest). The authors also showed that the primary mechanism through which childhood socio-economic circumstances impacted on adult outcomes was through their effects on the individual's own education outcomes: '[The] educational capital with which individuals confront the realities of competition in a market society is substantially predictable when one takes into account their profile in terms of socio-economic origin' (Nolan et al. 2006: 135).

However, the authors emphasised that risk does not translate into destiny, such that those whose life histories included low levels of parental education and great difficulty making ends meet in childhood comprised just one fifth of those below the income poverty line in 2001. 'Outcomes such as poverty are determined by a multiplicity of factors and even in circumstances of multiple disadvantage individuals shape their destinies through coping strategies that involve mobilising personal and social resources' (Nolan et al. 2006: 125).

### 3.2.1 Selecting cases for interpretive analysis

Table 3.2 Selection of sample for construction of composite life narratives

Birth cohort	Number of LHSC respondents			
	Household difficulty growing up	Father's education to primary certificate <sup>1</sup>	One or more years income poverty 1994-2001	All three criteria
<=1935	18	27	18	8
1945-1954	19	25	8	4
1965-1974	10	14	6	1

<sup>1</sup>Intermediate certificate or less for youngest cohort

With the study by Nolan et al. (2006) in mind, I selected all those respondents in the LHSC database who reported to the LII survey that their households had had 'some' or 'great' difficulty making ends meet in childhood. Eighteen respondents in the first cohort, nineteen in the second, and ten respondents in the third fell into this category (forty-seven respondents in total). With this sample I carried out an interpretive analysis of their life story interviews that focused particularly (but not exclusively) on the respondents' experiences of education and 'starting out'.

### 3.2.2 Selecting cases for comparative analysis

In order to explore the pathways through which childhood circumstances contributed to adult experiences of poverty, I selected a smaller sample of nine respondents (three in each cohort) for more detailed, cross-cohort analysis. The criteria for inclusion were: 'some' or 'great' difficulty making ends meet in childhood; father's education to primary certificate or less (intermediate certificate or less for Cohort 3), and exposure to income poverty in adulthood. As Table 3.2 shows, in the youngest cohort just one LHSC respondent met all three criteria. For this cohort I therefore selected respondents who experienced income poverty in adulthood and at least one of the childhood indicators. The number of 'Living in Ireland' waves during which a respondent was exposed to poverty, and other factors such as the richness of the life story interview, were also taken into account.

All the respondents selected in this fashion turned out to be women; just one man (in Cohort 2) might have been selected but I decided not to do so in order to simplify the process of comparison. Drawing on all the data available for each of the respondents in the sub-sample – ‘Living in Ireland’ variables, life story interviews, life history calendars and social network schedules – I constructed theoretically informed ‘composite’ or ‘ideal type’ life narratives for each cohort.<sup>5</sup> This approach has been informed by the work of a number of scholars who have sought to mobilise either the narrative potential of quantitative longitudinal research (Laub and Sampson 1993; Singer et al. 1998; Heinz 2003; Isaksson et al. 2006; Elliott 2008) or the potential for qualitative, biographical interviews to reveal structural patterns in different socio-historical contexts (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiaume 1981; Smilde 2005).<sup>6</sup>

In addition to providing a way to tell ‘collective stories’ about pathways to the reproduction of disadvantage in the three cohorts, the composite narratives also serve to protect the confidentiality of informants, which is at greater risk of violation when multiple data sources are used. Throughout the report, names and other identifying details have been altered or removed to preserve respondents’ confidentiality.

In summary, the analysis for this report drew on two purposively selected samples from the LHSC database, identified according to distinct criteria in order to meet different analytical objectives. The first comprised all LHSC respondents who reported to the LII survey that their households had experienced ‘some’ or ‘great’ difficulty making ends meet when they were growing up. This sample was identified in order to facilitate an interpretive analysis of the intersection of lives and historical times in changing experiences of education and ‘starting out’. The results of that analysis are provided in Chapter 4, below. The second sample

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<sup>5</sup> An excerpt from a ‘life map’ linking data from all four sources for an individual respondent is provided in the Appendix. These ‘life maps’ formed the basis for construction of the composite narratives. For more detail on the procedure, see Gray and O’Carroll (2008).

<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth discussion see Elliott (2005).

comprised respondents who had experienced one or both of the childhood risk factors for poverty in adulthood identified by Nolan et al. (2006), and who were also identified as at risk of poverty in adulthood during the 1990s. The purpose of this sample was to generate composite 'ideal-type' narratives in order to identify, amongst those who experienced poverty across the life course, similarities and differences in the timing and sequencing of early life transitions across birth cohorts. The results of that analysis are presented in Chapter 5.

## **4 Memories of child poverty, education and ‘starting out’**

Nolan et al. (2006: 142) found that growing up in a household that had great difficulty making ends meet, and where the Primary Certificate was the highest level of education achieved by a parent, substantially increased the risk of poverty in later life. They also found that the effect of childhood disadvantage on the individual’s own educational capital was the principal mechanism whereby inter-generational disadvantage was transmitted (Nolan et al: 138). However, it should also be noted that the returns to education (in terms of upward social mobility) have declined markedly across the twentieth century (Breen and Whelan 1993; Raftery and Hout 1993; Whelan and Hannan 1999; Layte and Whelan 2000).

Almost all the respondents interviewed for the ‘Life Histories and Social Change’ project provided rich accounts of their experience of education and the transition out of education, creating a unique opportunity to explore the subjective experience of this ‘critical moment’ in different historical contexts (Millar 2007). My interpretive analysis of these accounts proceeded through detailed reading, coding and validation of themes through a process of constant comparison (Glaser 1965).

### **4.1 Child poverty and education in the nineteen-thirties and forties**

The 1930s and 1940s, when the members of our oldest cohort were growing up, corresponded to the consolidation of what has been described as ‘rural fundamentalism’ (Commins 1986) in the wake of post-independence secessionist policies oriented towards securing and maintaining the state after 1922. The period after 1932 saw an expansion of the number of social welfare schemes (including the introduction of children’s allowances in 1944), coupled with a decline in their relative generosity (Cousins 2005: 26-27). Economic policy

centred on attaining greater self-sufficiency through the imposition of tariffs oriented towards supporting domestic industry, and through the encouragement of tillage agriculture in support of the smaller farmers that comprised much of the electoral support base for Fianna Fáil (Ó Gráda 1997:5). Farmers comprised 44 per cent of gainfully employed men in 1926 (Breen et. al 1990: 55), and just over half of all farms were less than thirty acres in size, a proportion that had changed little since the middle of the previous century (Turner 1987). Agricultural labourers comprised 14 per cent of employed men.

The stability of the small-farm population has been linked to its 'cultural autonomy and effective methods of self-reproduction' under the 'stem-family' system of inheritance (Hannan and Commins 1992: 81), although the historical evolution, form and extent of these practices have also been subject to considerable debate (for a discussion see Gray 2008). Unquestionably, however, the Ireland of the 1930s and 1940s was characterised by a unique combination of low marriage, high marital fertility and high levels of emigration (Ó Gráda 1997: 192).

Within this context, Fahey (1998: 386) has argued that the policy paradigm of 'patriarchal familism' acquired a 'particular cast in Ireland by virtue of its particular linkages within the classes of small property owners (especially family farmers) who dominated the social structure in the first half of the present century.' At the heart of this 'policy paradigm' was the notion that individual welfare depends on inclusion in a cohesive, role-segregated family unit structured according to hierarchies of gender and age.

However, education comprised one area where there was a potential for conflict between the requirements of the small-farm household economy and those of state formation. The School Attendance Act of 1926 had required every child to attend from six until fourteen years of age. Sanctions for non-compliance extended from visits and formal warnings to fines on parents and, ultimately, committal to 'industrial schools', where children could be detained up to the age



of 16 (Fahey 1992: 379-380). Fahey (1992: 382) calculated that the implementation of this Act had direct consequences for about a third of families with school-age children.

Later debates about the desirability of raising the school leaving age came down on the side of the small-farm household economy. An inter-departmental government committee concluded in 1935 that the withdrawal of juvenile labour from agriculture 'would be a serious hardship to parents' (quoted in Kennedy 2001:126), and it was not until 1972 that the compulsory leaving age was raised to 15 (Kennedy 2001: 130). The percentage of 14-16 year olds who were not in full-time education declined slowly during this period, from 62 per cent in 1929 to 58 per cent in 1944 (Ó Buachalla 1988: 78).

Fahey (1992) argued that factors other than economic requirements may have resulted in reluctance on the part of children to attend school during this period, including the difficulty of getting to and from school, the widespread use of corporal punishment, and the doubtful education value of what went on in school. He suggested that basic literacy would have been achieved by age ten, and that in many cases poor instruction and boredom meant that children learned little from school teaching. Certainly, the first two factors are common themes in our respondents' accounts.<sup>7</sup> Patrick (b.1934) was particularly vocal about the harsh treatment meted out in his school:

INT: So how was school in general?

RESP: Well I don't want to go into it too much but there were a few brothers who were anything but Christian.

INT: Understood.

RESP: There was one particular brother now and the other brothers used to send him lads to be slapped and with all due respects I think he was getting sexual kicks slapping youngsters; that is in retrospect, that particular brother. The lay teachers ... but there was one lay teacher and he was as bad as any of them, but I think he

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<sup>7</sup> All names have been changed and other potentially identifying material altered or removed.

was involved with greyhounds and maybe if his greyhound didn't win he'd take it out on the youngsters the next day.

Given the recent levels of attention to past ill-treatment of children in public discourse, it is not surprising that such memories were to the forefront of our respondents' minds. Notably, however, amongst unhappy memories, cold and hunger were just as salient as physical punishment:

INT: How is it different for your grandchildren now that are going to school? To your school days?

RESP: Sure, sure, 'tis grand now, they like going to school now, yeah, they do. We didn't fancy it at all then because it was strict then.

INT: It was hard.

RESP: Walking twenty miles wet and dry and if you got wet in the morning you suffered it all day in school.

INT: Is that right, so there'd be no place to dry clothes?

RESP: Nah.

(James b.1924)

Our respondents who grew up on small farms spoke almost universally of having to work on the farm before and after school:

INT: What was it like then going to school?

RESP: Well it was something, we had to do work before we went to school because we lived on a farm and there was plenty of little jobs that we had to do and so we were always rushing at the last minute and we managed to get there you know not too much after the time anyway.

INT: Yes and what would you have been doing before you went to school where you lived?

RESP: Probably well I suppose when I got a little bit older, feeding calves and feeding pigs and, you know, living on a farm.

(Dolores b.1934)

Joan's recollection of her childhood education combines the themes of difficulty getting to school and poor instruction:

INT: Back anyway to the childhood, so you grew up here and what was the first day of school like?

RESP: Well I don't remember the first day at school, I don't remember. I remember, of course, a lot about school because I had to walk three miles in winter and summer.

INT: There and back?

RESP: And it wasn't easy, you know, and coming home sometimes it would be, our teacher, I don't know, the poor man, he seemed to spend half his time in the clouds, he might get a fit of talking to someone about something at half two when we should be going home and as a result we'd be leaving at three or four and it would be dark by the time we'd get home starving of the hunger.

(Joan b.1916)

These memories provide evidence in favour of Fahey's (1992) argument that the hardship entailed in getting to school, together with poor instruction and corporal punishment, may well have led to an aversion to education on the part of many children. However, a second, contradictory theme of regret at not having been able to pursue their education beyond the statutory age limit also appears strongly in our interviews, as do memories of good teachers who tried to encourage their pupils to go further.

Mary was born on a small farm in 1929. She remembered that she 'shot up the hand' in response to questions from the Bishop at her confirmation and that her teacher was 'delighted', telling her that she had the potential to enter the civil service. Mary 'would have loved to have stayed on,' but 'things were different that time.' Others were encouraged to continue but, for reasons of their own, preferred not to. Brenda (b. 1934) 'went out and set potatoes in an arable field because I hated school that much.' Her principal told her that 'I was a good scholar and he wanted me to do my Leaving,' but she felt that she was 'hopeless

at maths' and 'knew' she would fail. Amongst those students who would have liked to go further, the obligation to help around the farm or care for parents was a major factor in preventing them from doing so.

Patricia (b.1933) felt that her mother 'favoured' her younger sister who was given the opportunity to go to secondary school while Patricia was expected to help on the farm. Even though some scholarships were available to assist 'bright' pupils with continuing their education, cost remained an inhibiting factor for others.

James was the son of an agricultural labourer:

INT: And when you were going to school what did you hope you were going to get out of life? When you grew up then?

RESP: [Incredulous laughter] You didn't know what to do at that time. There was five of us, five boys, in the same class. And there was a priest came over one day and he asked the teacher could they, she, recommend anyone that would like to go to college in, to [named place] ... She picked out two boys and then she said I think there's a third fella as well she said but he couldn't afford it [Laughter]. We couldn't either. They were farmers y'see the two boys were picked.

(James b.1924)

Our respondents' memories indicate that, while Fahey (1992) was correct to highlight the significance of physical punishment and the hardship of getting to school in deterring children from pursuing their education further, economic considerations also played a considerable part. Hannan and Commins (1992: 96) pointed to the significance of 'effective arrangements for the dispersal and social placement of non-inheritors' within the family strategies deployed by smallholding farmers during the 1930s and 1940s. Many within the class of agricultural labourers were 'relatives assisting', who were also often employed as seasonal labourers on other holdings (Breen et al. 1990: 56). Their numbers declined steadily from 22.2 per cent of the male workforce in 1926 to 16.4 per cent in 1951 (Breen et al. 1990: 56) as the opportunities for employment in agriculture contracted.

Emigration represented a significant alternative strategy for the dispersal of those who would not take over the family farm, but educational attainment was also promoted as a path to economic security for some non-inheritors. Especially from the 1960s onwards, according to Hannan and Commins (1992: 94), smallholder families were more successful than working-class families at using the education system to gain access to the new employment opportunities generated within a changing socio-economic environment.

#### **4.2 Child poverty and education in the 1950s and 1960s**

The second cohort of LHSC respondents grew up during a period of 'agonising reappraisal' (Garvin 2004) when the policies of 'rural fundamentalism' were yielding to those of 'developmentalism,' and the opening of the economy to foreign direct investment. The 1950s have been described as 'a miserable decade for the Irish economy', when real national income virtually stagnated and net emigration reached its twentieth-century peak (Ó Gráda 1997: 25-27). This was followed by a decade of rapid growth in the 1960s as economic policy changed in favour of an export-oriented strategy and towards attracting foreign investment. After 1961, the opportunities for employment in agriculture and in low-skilled manual work diminished, while those in middle-class and skilled manual work increased (Layte and Whelan 2000). From the late 1960s social welfare spending entered an expansionary phase accompanied by a shift towards a social insurance model (Cousins 2005: 29-30). Age at marriage had been declining steadily since the 1930s, but began to decline more rapidly in the 1950s (Coleman 1992: 64-66).

Most of our respondents in this cohort were too old to have availed of the free secondary education scheme that was introduced in 1967 (and the school leaving age was not increased from 14 to 15 years until 1972). Nevertheless, the percentage of 14-16 year olds in secondary and vocational education increased from 22 per cent in 1944 to 46 per cent in 1962, partly because more children in

this age category remained in education, and partly because they were more likely to enter the second-level system than to extend the number of years spent in primary education (Ó Buachalla 1988: 78). Publicly owned vocational schools (that did not charge fees) were introduced in the 1930s, in order to provide 'general and practical training in preparation for employment in trades, manufacturing, agriculture, commerce and other industrial pursuits' (Vocational Education Act, 1930, quoted in Breen et al. 1990: 125). The figures compiled by Ó Buachalla (1988: 78) indicate that, while the rate of enrolment in vocational schools almost doubled between the mid-1940s and early 1960s, increased enrolment in secondary schools accounted for a greater proportion of the redistribution of 14-16 year olds out of primary school and the labour force during this period.

According to Whelan and Hannan (1999) there were clear class distinctions between the different types of schools in the secondary sector, with voluntary secondary and boarding schools catering for middle-class children, while children from working-class or small-farm families attended the local vocational school:

Local, communal stratification systems in Ireland were quite elaborated. In these socially divisive status conditions being *sent to the tech.* was, for most middle-class and aspiring middle-class parents, a fate with which to threaten one's more errant children with. In reality it was to be avoided even for the least able child (Whelan and Hannan 1999: 291; emphasis in original).

A number of respondents in the Life Histories and Social Change study who grew up during this period remembered that their parents had made great efforts to enable them to attend secondary school. Doreen's (b. 1945) mother was 'too proud' to allow her older siblings to avail of scholarships to the 'posh' secondary school, but managed to pay her fees for a year:

INT: And then, later on, you finished your primary education or whatever, had you got, had you any idea what you wanted to do, would you go into secondary school?

RESP: Oh, nursing. Day one. From day one. I went actually to the [secondary school] ... but it was the posh secondary school, as they call it, you know, against the vocational school. And I went for a year and, God love it when I think of it, I mean they paid my fees for a year, and looking back on it I didn't have the common sense to think to continue it. You know, you know better, all my friends were going to the vocational so after a year then, I transferred to the vocational and did two years there.

Separation from her peers was also a factor in Sarah's (b. 1946) decision to leave secondary school against her mother's wishes:

INT. Did you have a choice, or was it [family] tradition again.

RESP. No it was just the thing to do, to go to secondary. But all my friends left in primary and went to [the] technical school. And they went into clothing factories after at 14 then. My friend next door, she was working at 13 ... Most of my friends started working at 14. I left school at 16 and I could have stayed on, my mother would have let us stay on, you didn't have to leave or anything, she would have done everything to keep us at school. There was nobody I knew in my school anymore, so I left at 16. I went off to England at 16.

Some of the factors that discouraged continuing in education in the first cohort persisted in the experiences of the second. Michael (b. 1946) was unable to go past primary school because he failed to obtain a scholarship to a boarding school, and the distant vocational school was too difficult to access in the absence of a school transport scheme.

Secondary education beyond a couple of years in the 'tech' was not expected or sought after by many children, however – especially not by boys. Whelan and Hannan (1999: 293) demonstrated that a growing gender gap in educational attainment began to emerge amongst those born between 1940 and 1954. In the cohort born between 1955 and 1969, 42 per cent of girls completed the Leaving Certificate, compared to 27 per cent of boys.

Even up to my time, especially with boys, like fourteen was the finishing age and kids couldn't wait to finish school; there was no big incentive. They didn't see an education as something, because generally what happened was, fellows in particular, went to England. (Michael, b. 1946)

[T]hey were different times then. When you were fourteen or fifteen you were trying to earn a bob anywhere you could and you didn't give much thought to school and it was get out and get working, you didn't need much support. All you needed was a strong back and get out and get at it [Laughter]. (Bernard, b. 1946)

While corporal punishment re-appears as one of the negative memories of schooldays in this cohort, being treated differently because you were poor stands out as a much stronger theme.

I don't know, I think the nuns were too snobbish. Any children whose fathers had good jobs or professional jobs were treated differently than we were. We were put to the back of the class – didn't matter how good we were – we were always put to the back of the class and looked down on is all I can say. Not all the nuns now, but the majority of the nuns had this very snobbish thing.

[.....]

It was where you came from and everything because I came from a housing estate, you know a corporation housing estate, and we were just the children from the housing estate. Though we still learned a lot in spite of it all.

(Sarah, b. 1946)

Doreen (b. 1945) similarly remembered 'never being picked for anything special ... because you were just one of the, the poor crew.' A number of respondents recalled that physical punishment was not meted out to the children of better off people (an observation that also occurred in life stories from the first cohort):

If the child came from a family of substance the child was pampered and promoted. There was a judge's son that sat at the same desk as me that came in when, he was



like he was dressed for his holy communion every day as opposed to going to school ... and he never got a slap ever in his life and you could say that about the sergeant's son and so on and so forth. (Bernard, b. 1946)

In summary, the childhood memories of education recorded by this cohort of respondents describe a transitional period in the development of the state. Especially amongst those from rural small-farm backgrounds, there is continuity with the earlier cohort in references to the obligation to work on the farm before and after school, and to a lesser extent, to the difficulty of getting to and from school. Corporal punishment continued to be mentioned by respondents from both rural and urban backgrounds. However, in this cohort class differences in the experience of education – both in relation to the differences between secondary and vocational schools, and in relation to treatment by teachers within the school environment – emerged as a striking new theme. During the period when most of these respondents were growing up, public discourse increasingly centred on the perceived failure of Irish social and economic policy (Garvin 2004), and there was a new emphasis on meritocratic education in the development of human capital (Breen et al. 1990: 127-128).

In this context, our respondents became more conscious of the ways in which the educational system had failed them, especially since free secondary education became available shortly after most of them left school. The emergence of new employment opportunities in manual work (both in Ireland and the UK), and in white-collar jobs, meant that many of them felt little incentive to persevere with education at the time, although in retrospect at least some of them reflected on their decision to leave school with regret.

### **4.3 Child poverty and education in the 1970s and 1980s**

The 1970s and 1980s, when the respondents in our third cohort were growing up, were decades of dramatic social change. Ireland joined the European Economic Community in 1973. Economic growth continued through the 1970s, but

employment growth was 'largely stagnant', with most new jobs being generated within the service sector (Breen et al. 1990: 135). Employment subsequently collapsed in the 1980s, due to the demise of indigenous manufacturing and the failure of foreign-owned firms to create sufficient numbers of replacement jobs (O'Hearn 2001: 159; Ó Riain and O'Connell 2000: 319). State spending expanded in the 1970s and during the first half of the 1980s, but this was followed by severe cutbacks between 1987 and 1990, in response to the fiscal deficit. Ó Riain and O'Connell (2000: 326) described the welfare state model that emerged as a "pay-related" welfare state which provides a basic minimal level of security and service on near-universal grounds to all resident citizens, but one which mixes public and private components in a manner that allows those with advantages generated in the market to supplement their social citizenship rights with their own resources.'

These changes in the formation of the economy and the state had consequences for the class structure: the proportions of men employed in both manual and 'non-manual' occupations continued to increase through the middle of the 1980s, but thereafter, manual occupations began to decline (Breen et al. 1990: 57; Layte and Whelan 2000: 95). Married female labour force participation increased strikingly during these decades, becoming especially pronounced after the mid-1980s (Fahey et al. 2000: 254).

In addition to the 'material' changes in the structure of Irish society, significant cultural shifts also occurred. Fahey (1998: 391) described the 1970s as a period when the transition from the family policy paradigm of 'patriarchal familism' to that of 'egalitarian individualism' was well under way. The 1980s in particular were dominated by what may be described as 'culture wars' surrounding sexuality and family life (Fahey and Layte 2007: 155-157). The total fertility rate (TFR) – an estimate of the average number of births per woman – declined rapidly from the 1970s onwards, while the proportion of births occurring outside marriage began

to increase quite dramatically during the mid-1980s (Fahey and Layte 2007: 162 and 166).

Significant changes in education policy also occurred in response to an OECD/Irish Government funded report that highlighted social class and regional disparities in participation and a need to develop more vocational subjects (Breen et al. 1990: 126). Participation rates increased dramatically following the introduction of free secondary education in 1967. However, significant class (and gender) differences in participation remained; Breen et al. (1990: 132) estimated that just 16 per cent of boys and 41 per cent of girls from semi or unskilled manual backgrounds attained the Leaving Certificate in 1981, compared to 59 per cent of boys and 71 per cent of girls from lower non-manual backgrounds. During the 1980s and 1990s, there were absolute increases in the numbers of young people from working class backgrounds who completed the Leaving Certificate, but 'no significant reduction in relative inequalities between the different social classes' (Smyth and Hannan 2000: 117). Similarly, while all social groups increased their participation in third-level education during this period, relative class inequalities in access to third-level persisted (Smyth and Hannan 2000: 119).

Given the dramatic changes that their young lives traversed, it is somewhat disappointing that the thematic data on experiences of education and 'starting out' are considerably thinner for the members of the third LHSC cohort included in this study. For a start, there are simply fewer cases. Fewer respondents opted in to our study from this age cohort and, in general, a smaller proportion of them experienced financial hardship (as measured by the variable on 'making ends meet') when growing up. It is also likely that the way in which people remember their childhoods varies according to their current life stage (Brannen 2004). Nevertheless, a number of themes may be identified.

Financial considerations continued to be identified as an obstacle by some respondents:

INT: Did you stay in school until you finished school?

RESP: I did, yes, and then I did a secretarial course and never went on to college, which is kind of a regret, but, you know.

INT: Why?

RESP: I would have liked to have gone, and at the time we wouldn't have had an awful lot of money and the opportunity wouldn't have been there, financially. I suppose had I really wanted to I could have made it happen, but I went to the secretarial course, I got a job and I was kind of always of the opinion that if you have a job you stay with it, like, because jobs weren't plentiful and I was never not working then. (Maureen, b. 1970)

Angela (b. 1965) thought the practice of streaming children into different classes in secondary school was 'stupid', but asserted that she never really cared because she and her peers 'didn't even think about' going on to third level education:

INT: Was there pressure at home to do stuff like that, to go to college?

RESP: No, it was whatever you wanted to do you did; there was never pressure or anything. If you wanted to do that, you did that; if you didn't, you didn't. But the money wouldn't have been there to send you to college because [one of my brothers], he went first and like he saved and saved and saved and I remember he went to Dublin and he got digs and I think it was £40 or something a week and that was kind of bed and breakfast and your evening meal, that was £40. And to get the £40 to give him every week and the bus fare up and down was a big thing ... We were never short of anything, put it that way, but to do something like that, you kind of scrimped and scraped to do that.

Ruth (b. 1970) loved going to school because it provided some escape from a troubled home life, but that, in turn, made it difficult for her to succeed in education:

But I remember being in school and it was just a relief to be there and away from the house and away from the atmosphere. I find now I was very dopey or something. My mind used to be elsewhere and I used to get into terrible mischief and Jesus I'd be murdered. They'd take you out of the class and all. Oh it was desperate now, but I'd get slaps with the ruler from teachers; they could slap you. I remember we used to be saying, 'Lick your hands and it won't hurt as much.' We laughed at it. I think it was just innocence, pure innocence, compared to now inside in school.

Áine (b. 1969) and some of her peers travelled out of her immediate area to go to school, but felt like 'a fish out of water big time':

INT: In what way?

RESP: Just like I suppose in terms of family income, even accents, a lot of that sort of stuff and some of it not quite chips on our shoulders but maybe conscious of not being at the same level, so we tended to stick together, not as a gang by any means but I suppose other people would have come from different schools, maybe bigger groups so they would have known each other a lot more. So I did enjoy school. I was fairly good at school up to inter cert and I did enjoy it and I got a lot out of it and I suppose enjoyed the challenge and I used to be involved in tennis and hockey and I did a bit of running and the school choir and things like that as well. I enjoyed that.

In general, across the interviews there is an impression of enjoying school – especially its social aspects – without any strong commitment to education. Daly and Leonard (2002: 131), in a qualitative study of poor families carried out on behalf of the Combat Poverty Agency in 2000, found a similar pattern whereby 'for a third of the children school was nothing other than a venue for meeting friends.' Almost half of their child respondents 'framed their reference to school either indirectly by discussing schoolmates or by actively indicating their dislike of school.' Lynch and Lodge (2002) observed that the 'strong meritocratic ideology' that now pervades education inhibited the naming of class differences in their

study, and ensured that class processes were 'hidden' in practices such as the streaming that Angela (b. 1965) objected to.

In an ongoing longitudinal study tracking the progress of students through second-level education in Ireland, Smyth (2009: 2) found that students became differentiated in terms of their level of engagement with school in their second year:

The first group is more highly engaged in schoolwork, they find schoolwork challenging but invest more time in homework and study than they did in first year. This group is disproportionately made up of female students, those from middle-class (professional) backgrounds, and those in mixed ability or higher stream base classes. In contrast, the second group of students is drifting or even actively disengaging from schoolwork and is investing less time in homework/study than previously. This group is disproportionately made up of male students, those from working-class backgrounds and those allocated to lower stream classes.

This pattern whereby class processes are concealed in the everyday experience of school life may also go some way to explaining why the younger respondents in the present study found less to say about school and the transition to early adulthood. Moreover, increased *provision* of secondary education has been accompanied both by a decline in formal curricular differences amongst the different categories of secondary schools (Smyth and Hannan 2000: 110) and by greater social segregation *between* schools: pupils are less likely to have to travel outside their local area (or become boarders) in order to attend secondary school. These changes may all have led to a reduction in the *visibility* of discrimination within the education system.

Finally, it should be remembered that the respondents in this cohort were interviewed at a stage of the life cycle when they were at a reduced risk of experiencing income poverty (young to middle-aged adulthood – see Whelan and

Maître 2008a), during a period of boom in the Irish economy, so this also may have affected the extent to which they chose to reflect on the significance of education in their lives. But this does not mean that educational inequality had no impact on their individual life chances during the period when they were starting out. Young people with lower educational levels took longer to find their first job, experienced more and longer spells of unemployment, and experienced a reduction of their relative position in the labour market within the first five years out of school (Smyth and Hannan 2000: 122-123).

## **5 Paths through life: composite narratives of changing trajectories**

Chapter 4 focused on the first central theme of the life course paradigm identified by Elder (1994: 5-6) – how being born in different historical periods led to different experiences of education, and different constraints and options in starting out in twentieth-century Ireland. This chapter focuses to a greater extent on Elder's second theme – how the nature and timing of the transition from childhood to early adulthood affected the life trajectories of those who, having experienced hardship in their childhood financial circumstances, later found themselves at risk of income poverty. Elder identified two key ways in which lives might be 'ill-timed': (1) transitions may be un-timely with respect to age norms or (2) there may be an absence of 'goodness of fit' between some transitions and others as socio-historical circumstances change across the life span.

The analysis below focuses on a comparison of female life paths across the three birth cohorts. In order to develop the analysis, I constructed theoretically informed 'composite narratives' based on detailed reconstruction of three lives in each cohort, and informed by my reading of all the cases included in the study, in the manner described in Section 3, above. I argue that (for women at least) lives were 'mis-timed' in different ways in different historical contexts, and that this must be understood both in terms of changing constraints and opportunities in the wider economy and society, and in terms of changes in the nature of familial obligations across and within generations (Elder's third theme). The plans and choices adopted by individuals (Elder's fourth theme) were framed within these fluid parameters.

The summaries below are provided in order to illustrate characteristic trajectories across the three birth cohorts under consideration. In reading them, it should be remembered that they each represent a composite drawn from multiple life stories; they are not the life histories of particular individuals.



## 5.1 A path through life from the 1930s

Margaret was born in 1930, the second youngest child in a family of ten on a small farm in the west of Ireland. She also had a little sister who died when she was very young. Margaret was almost eighty years of age when we interviewed her for the Life Histories and Social Change project.

She went to school when she was four, and left at fifteen (1945), having spent the last two years helping the teacher with younger pupils. Her older brothers worked as agricultural labourers for local farmers, and her older sisters emigrated to England to train and work as nurses. Once she left school, Margaret helped her parents on the land and around the house. Her younger sister won a scholarship that enabled her to attend secondary school as a boarder, before following her older sisters to England.

Margaret worked at home for five years before finding semi-skilled employment, locally. She continued to live at home, handing over most of her wages to her mother, and attending dances for leisure, hoping to meet a young man who owned a car. She met her future husband in her early twenties, and they married when she was 25 (in 1955).

After marriage, Margaret moved in with her in-laws, who were also small farmers, and she found it difficult to get on with them. She had six children of her own, although she had hoped to have fewer. She cared for her in-laws when they became old and ill, as well as dropping round to help her own mother when she could. Her husband ran a small business as an agricultural contractor, in addition to working the farm, and Margaret helped him with the books. Her children attended secondary school (and some of them progressed to the Leaving Certificate), and her grandchildren are in college.

Margaret and her husband passed on the farm to her son some ten years ago (1995). He leases the land while he works for a small local manufacturing

company. Margaret's husband has experienced a serious illness in recent years, and she has some health problems herself. They like to travel to different places in Ireland for short holidays. Margaret is active in a local organisation linked to the Church, and she is generally content, although from time to time she worries about her financial situation.

## **5.2 A path through life from the 1950s**

Catherine was born one of seven children in a provincial urban area in 1950. She completed an interview with a member of the LHSC research team when she was in her late fifties. Her family lived in a two-bedroom, rented council house when she was growing up. Her father was a skilled manual labourer and her mother worked as a dressmaker to supplement the family income.

Catherine attended vocational school for two years, before leaving education at the age of 16 (in 1966). She lived at home, while working in a local firm as a typist, handing over most of her wages to her parents. Then at 19 (in 1969) she succeeded in obtaining an entry level job in the public service. She moved away from home, sharing a flat with some work colleagues. She loved her job, and was doing well when, unexpectedly, her father became seriously ill. Catherine returned home to be with her mother (in 1974) and took up local, unskilled employment.

About a year later Catherine got married, when she was 25. Her husband was employed in a semi-skilled occupation, and they lived in a council house that they have since purchased. They have four adult children who completed post-Leaving Certificate courses and are now married with their own children, and working locally. Catherine herself moved in and out of the labour market over the years, working in a number of casual and part-time jobs. Her husband has recently retired. They provide emotional support and advice to their adult children, and sometimes help with babysitting, but they are not in a position to assist them financially. Catherine and her husband have both begun to

experience minor health problems, but they enjoy modest leisure activities and feel they have a good life.

### **5.3 A path through life from the 1970s**

Róisín was born in an urban area in 1970, and was in her late thirties when she completed a life story interview. Her father was from a rural background and worked in a semi-skilled occupation, before being made redundant when Róisín was in her late teens (towards the end of the 1980s). Her large family of six brothers and sisters lived in a council house. Róisín's mother had been employed in the labour force before her children came along, but after that she worked at home caring for the family until, following her husband's redundancy, she went back to work in a series of part-time positions. Once Róisín and her siblings left home, her parents separated.

Róisín completed her Leaving Certificate, but did not consider going on to third-level education, although one of her younger brothers did so. She left school at eighteen and went to work in a local shop. A year later (1989) she became pregnant and moved into rented accommodation with her partner. Five years later they got married and moved into a council house. They have had four children, and recently purchased a larger home under the affordable housing scheme. Róisín's husband is employed in unskilled work, and she herself has been employed intermittently in part-time jobs that allow her to combine work and family responsibilities.

Róisín is happy with her life, and feels reasonably well off, although she does feel a bit stuck in a rut as far as her employment prospects are concerned, and she worries about anti-social behaviour in her neighbourhood. She is active in her local community, organising activities and outings for children.

## 5.4 Comparing life trajectories

The respondents in this study all shared the constraint of having experienced some degree of financial difficulty in their childhoods. However, the substance of what it meant to be poor, and the ways in which that poverty impacted on the transitions they made in early adulthood, varied according to the historical period in which they grew up. The structure of the economy and labour market, the dominant social policy paradigm, and the (gendered) pattern of obligations to family and kin, together shaped individual opportunities and choices, as did changing social norms and values.

Thus, while there was a general trend towards absolute social mobility across the twentieth century (Layte and Whelan 2000), the timing and sequencing of some people's lives did not 'fit' the opportunities for social mobility that presented themselves in different historical contexts. For women, the Life Histories and Social Change cases suggest that, across all three cohorts, events during the period of transition between leaving education and establishing a separate household contributed – in different ways – to the development of a poor 'fit' between the timing of individual lives and historical changes in the structure of opportunity.

The members of our oldest cohort of interviewees grew up in a world dominated – both politically and socially – by the interests of small-holding farmers, where individual life chances depended on the 'structuring principle of family property' (Breen et al. 1990: 56), and the prevailing 'policy paradigm' reinforced hierarchical gender and age relationships within the family household (Fahey 1998). In this context, emigration represented the main option for upward mobility available to most of those who did not inherit. Only a very small proportion of non-inheritors might expect to secure a more advantageous socio-economic niche through education. For women, the opportunity to emigrate or to pursue

education could be foreclosed by remaining on the family farm as a 'relative assisting' during the extended period between finishing school and marriage.<sup>8</sup>

Our oldest respondents talked about this period in their lives as one in which individuals did not control their own destinies. For example, having helped on the family farm for eleven years after leaving school, Brenda (b. 1934) recalled that '[My parents] didn't want me to get married because they thought I was too young, and I just said, "Well it is like this, all my days I was kept down and I am getting married now and that is it."' Power relations within the family household and the extended kinship group played a significant part in determining individual life chances. In a number of cases older brothers and sisters had simply left at the first opportunity, and sibling order may have been a factor in consigning individual girls to the role of inter-generational 'carer'. Economic historians have explored the significance of sibling order for patterns of inheritance amongst men (Ó Gráda 1980; Kennedy 1991); these findings suggest that it may be fruitful to consider the effects of sibling order on the life chances of women in similar socio-historical contexts.

The respondents in our 'middle' birth cohort grew up in a transitional period of mixed opportunities and constraints in the development of the Irish political economy. The belated introduction of free secondary education, together with expanding opportunities in skilled manual and lower non-manual employment, meant that young people from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds continued to leave school at a comparatively early age, although they were more likely to complete a number of years in vocational secondary education. The changing class structure created new opportunities for social mobility, but individual circumstances and choices – such as the decision to return home to be with a sick or widowed parent – could foreshorten the path.

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<sup>8</sup> If, of course, they married at all. Proportions never marrying reached a high-point in the 1930s, and had begun a steady, extended pattern of decline in the 1940s (Fahey 2007: 24).

In contrast to the respondents in the older cohort, those in the middle cohort describe the decision to care for (or be near) their parents in terms of a sense of obligation, or set of values surrounding the importance of family life, rather than in terms of relationships of power and control: in most cases they had already set out on a path towards independence when the transition occurred. Thus Doreen (b. 1945) had started to build a life in England, but decided to move back to Ireland for family reasons: 'We were – there was no support. There was no family calling ... You know. I wasn't, I was never, as I said, materialistic, so I'm not ... I just wanted the kids to be happy.' Changing social values and the more urban origins of the sample respondents in the middle cohort may also be factors in explaining this difference.

The 'mistiming' that characterised some early adult life transitions in the first two cohorts conformed to Elder's second type; that is, in the context of the individual life course they represented a poor 'fit' with changing socio-economic circumstances. By contrast, the examples from the youngest cohort approximated more to Elder's second type, insofar as they were 'untimely' with respect to prevailing age-norms. In the context of rapid social change, a mismatch may occur between the values governing individual behaviour and the institutional structuring of the life course. Thus, the 'untimeliness' of becoming a lone parent inhered in how it was associated with the establishment of an independent adult identity, rather than in pregnancy outside marriage per se. It is thus a challenge related to the synchronisation of social role transitions in the context of new opportunities for women in the wider society and changing relations of gender and generation within families (Fahey et al. 2000), given that there has been an incomplete transition to the policy paradigm of 'egalitarian individualism' (Fahey 1998).

In the LHSC sample there are a number of stories of becoming pregnant outside marriage in the second cohort (and within family memory, in all three cohorts), but in these cases the 'mistiming' of motherhood was always managed in ways

that reinforced the traditional family unit. Examples include immediate marriage, informal adoption of the child as a 'sister', and of course the well-known practice of sending a pregnant daughter away until her child was born and could be placed for adoption. In the third cohort, however, this pattern no longer held true, and young women were able to establish independent adult identities as unmarried mothers, often with the support of their own parents. For Emer (b. 1972), motherhood at sixteen was 'the start of an adult barrier thing, like they were not going to treat me like a child anymore.' Becoming a mother outside marriage did not, of course, preclude the development of a marital relationship. Ruth (b. 1970) lived with her daughter's father for six years before they got married, but by then he was 'a different man from what he was when he was seventeen.'

## 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 Summary and discussion

The NESCS (2005) report, *The Developmental Welfare State*, emphasised the importance of adopting a life cycle perspective in order to evaluate the adequacy of social protection and to provide a framework for choosing amongst competing priorities. Within this framework, 'Children receive priority because of the greater awareness of the later problems that result from a poor start in life.' Similarly, the report identified young adults, aged 18-29 years, as a distinct life cycle stage in which people must make a number of key transitions (NESCS 2005: 226).

Subsequently, **quantitative longitudinal research** on the life cycle in Ireland demonstrated that:

- 1 While the exposure to risk of poverty does indeed vary across the life cycle, structural factors such as social class continue to have a substantial independent effect (Whelan and Maître 2008a). Further, the effects of life cycle stage and social class interact with one another, such that life cycle effects are more pronounced for working-class people (Whelan and Maître 2008b).
- 2 Growing up in disadvantaged households significantly increases the risk of exposure to poverty in adulthood, and individual educational attainment comprises one of the principal mechanisms through which poverty is transmitted across the generations (Nolan et al. 2006).
- 3 Risk is not destiny, and the transition to early adulthood represents an important turning point, at which most people enter low risk phases of the life cycle (Layte and Whelan 2002; Whelan and Maître 2008a).



This study has added to the evidence base on poverty and the life cycle from a childhood centred perspective through a **qualitative life history analysis** of a major new database of life story interviews (LHSC) linked to a panel survey (LII).

The first phase of the analysis comprised a thematic comparison across birth cohorts of experiences of education and 'starting out' amongst those respondents to LHSC who reported to LII that their households had difficulty making ends meet when they were growing up. This revealed that, while memories of class-based discrimination within the education system appear in all three cohorts, the theme predominates within the middle cohort of respondents who left school during the 1960s. This period corresponded to a transitional period of rapid transformation in the class structure in Ireland, when opportunities in middle-class occupations were increasing, and the returns to second-level education were still relatively high. By contrast, memories of the physical hardship of getting to school, corporal punishment, and the absence of any real option to pursue education further, predominated amongst our oldest cohort of respondents, while amongst the youngest cohort the emphasis was on school as a transitory social experience with some references to the financial obstacles to pursuing third-level education.

The thematic evidence, therefore, adds depth to longitudinal quantitative research demonstrating the phenomenon of 'maximally maintained inequality' (Raftery and Hout 1993). While education operated as a mediating factor between social class background and adult socio-economic outcomes across the twentieth century, perceptions of class discrimination are most salient amongst those who started out at a time when continuing in education yielded the greatest opportunity for upward social mobility.

In the second phase of the analysis I carried out a detailed examination of a subset of respondents in order to elucidate differences in the pattern of early adult life transitions across the three cohorts. Following Elder (1994), I argue that

the ‘turning points’ leading to vulnerability to poverty in later life can be understood in terms of a pattern of ‘mistiming’ in key transitions. I suggest that (for women) the type of ‘untimely’ transitions shifted from one characterised by ‘poor fit’ with prevailing socio-economic opportunities and constraints in the first and second cohorts, to one characterised by ‘mistimed’ – or poorly synchronised – role transitions in the third cohort. In each cohort, however, the sociological significance of the timing of lives depended on the ‘goodness of fit’ between individual role transitions and changing social contexts, including the structures of socio-economic opportunity, the policy environment, and patterns of obligation to family and kin.

## **6.2 Key recommendations**

The promise of qualitative life history research lies in its capacity to elucidate complex life trajectories in terms of the subjective experiences and strategies that lie behind them, as they unfold against a changing historical background. The ‘life cycle approach’ to social policy emerged partly in response to the perception that the lives of contemporary young adults have become more ‘individualised’ than those of their parents and grandparents. However, more empirically robust and historically nuanced research suggests that the timing and sequencing of the role transitions that make up the passage from childhood to adulthood have fluctuated over time, and that social class inequalities continue to ensure that some people meet the challenges presented by changing opportunities and constraints across the life course with greater resources and capacities than others.

This study has further demonstrated the extent to which the challenges presented by different life cycle stages vary, not only according to long-term patterns of change in the institutionalisation of the life course, but also according to the historical period in which individuals traverse them. Thus some of the opportunities and constraints that confront people at particular life course stages are determined by long-term patterns of change, such as the shift from property to wages in the structuring of life chances for most individuals, whereas others

depend on more short-term fluctuations in the economic and policy environment, such as the timing of social policy initiatives and whether or not one enters the labour market during a period of economic recession. The life cycle approach that informs the model of the 'developmental welfare state' was adopted during a period of economic boom in Ireland that has since come to an end. The evidence from this study demonstrates that policies targeting different life course stages must be flexible enough to respond rapidly to such relatively short-term fluctuations.

The 'Celtic Tiger' created new opportunities for employment and household formation amongst young adults in the context of a continuing trend towards lengthening this life course stage: rates of cohabitation and the proportion of households comprised of 'pre-family' couples increased even as 'catch-up' fertility led to something of a 'baby boom' amongst women in their thirties. Employment rates amongst women with young children increased to historically high levels, while the 'gender gap' (favouring women) in participation in higher education continued to grow. Initial data suggest that the impact of the present recession is being felt most severely by young adults who are losing their employment in manual occupations.

These circumstances highlight the limitations of social policy approaches that are bound too closely *either* by 'lock-step' notions of standardised life course transitions *or* by an emphasis on 'spot coverage' at particular life-course stages (Settersten 2004). Instead, a flexible life cycle approach would recognise the extent to which young adults are confronted by an extended period of choice and uncertainty as they strive to attain economic security. It would adopt a whole-of-life perspective that facilitated more complex patterns of movement between education, training and work, and would support working parents in managing family responsibilities. It would also continue to recognise the substantial ways in which social class differences, especially those experienced in childhood and

'starting out', frame opportunities and constraints at 'turning points' throughout the life course.

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### Appendix 1. Selection from Life Map

Respondent ID: [...] Key: LHI – Life History Interview  
 Date of Birth: 3/1933 LHC – Life History Calendar  
 Sex: Female LHNS – Life History Network Schedule  
 LII – Living in Ireland Survey Data

Timeline	LIFE PHASE/ Respondent Age	Segment	Source of Information
3/1933	CHILDHOOD	Living in two-bedroom cottage on small farm in [North-West of Ireland]. Seventh in line of eight children. Five boys and three girls. <i>'Oh it wasn't just easy there was just too many of us too many we had to be reared you know.'</i>	LHI
		Father and mother had no education. Household had 'some difficulty' making ends meet.	LII
		R. remembers happy times in childhood, despite hardship. <i>'[We] were beside [the sea] and that was our bathroom in the evenings and in the summertime we went down there played in the water, gathering mussels we used to cook them, all this carry on.'</i>	LHI
		Support network in childhood included grandmother, whom she used to spend summers with, two women who were her friends' mothers, and her older sister.	LHNS
		R. also mentioned an aunt who was a housemaid in a 'big house' who was <i>'always up helping my mothe'</i> and who played with the children.	LHI
9/1938	5	Started school	LHC
		R. remembers being good at school and would have liked to have been a teacher. <i>'I remember as well, I was about 11 or so, the classes above me would have been 4<sup>th</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup>... they were out doing the long division sums and the teacher was showing them, the other class, and she called me up to see these sums like, what you think about them as she done them over and says to the others do some on the blackboard, they couldn't do them yet. And she says t". And she saw that as the greatest thing to say, that I'd try you know, and I was able to do them!'</i>	LHI
5/1946	13	Finished school	LHC