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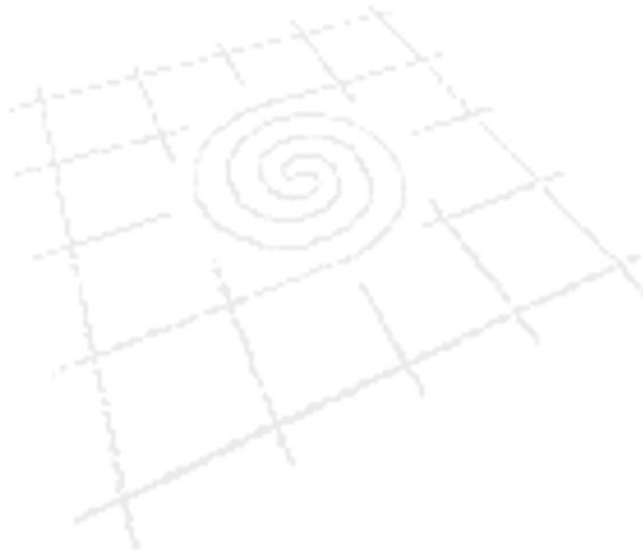


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Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

A Life History and Mixed Methods approach to examining Turning Points as the Intersection between Biography and History

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Introduction

Our purpose in this paper is to suggest a methodological strategy for combining qualitative and quantitative longitudinal, life history data, and to illustrate its potential for addressing current theoretical questions about the impact of historical processes on biography. We do so by drawing on data collected in a major infrastructural research project funded by the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences. The paper begins by introducing the 'Life Histories and Social Change Project' at NUI Maynooth. We then describe our strategies for (1) reconstructing life narratives by combining information from multiple data sources, and (2) selecting life narratives as cases for analysis in order to address specific, theoretically driven research questions. We illustrate this process with two cases drawn from the Life Histories and Social Change Project, and suggest ways in which the respondents' life narratives might be used to address questions about the differential impact of period effects on the life course and to assess, drawing on the work of Andrew Abbott (2001), the importance of the nature of transitions between trajectories.

The paper represents work in progress: primary data collection in our project has just finished, and we are currently preparing what will ultimately be a rich and complex data set for archiving in the nascent Irish Qualitative Data Archive¹. The latter exciting project has been funded by the Irish Government (under PRTL14) as part of the Irish Social Science Platform. Dr. Aileen O'Carroll is the archive manager.

In the 1980 Ireland altered its tax system, spreading the income tax net to include farmers and introducing more systematic taxing of the self-employed (Messere et al, 2003; Hardiman, 2000). Tax administration was also modernized (Cassells & Thornhill, 1993).

¹ www.iqda.ie

The ‘Life Histories and Social Change Project’ at NUI Maynooth

This three-year project, co-directed by Professor Seán O’Riain and Dr. Jane Gray of the Department of Sociology at NUI Maynooth, received funding from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences in 2005. The senior research associates on the project were Dr. Aileen O’Carroll and James Monagle. We carried out detailed life story interviews with respondents who had participated in the ‘Living in Ireland Survey,’ carried out by the Irish Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), as part of the European Community Household Panel survey between 1994 and 2001. With the (gratefully acknowledged) assistance of the ESRI, respondents from three birth cohorts within the national sample were invited to opt in to our study. The complete LHSC database comprises 113 life story interviews, life history calendars, and simple retrospective social network schedules.

Table 1: Sampling of Interviewees by Gender and Birth Cohort

		% of interviewees	% of total sample (1994-2001)	Number of Interviewees
Born pre-1934	Male	43%	47%	19
	Female	57%	53%	25
1945-54	Male	48%	48%	20
	Female	52%	52%	22
1965-74	Male	49%	32%	10
	Female	51%	68%	21

Table 2: Sampling of Interviewees by Social Class of Parent (Main

Breadwinner)

		% of interviewees	% of total sample (1994-2001)	Number of Interviewees
Born pre-1934	Professional/Managerial	34%	17%	15
	Other Non-Manual/Skilled Manual	43%	41%	19
	Other Manual	23%	42%	10
1945-54	Professional/Managerial	33%	18%	14
	Other Non-Manual/Skilled Manual	33%	40%	14
	Other Manual	33%	42%	14
1965-74	Professional/Managerial	34%	26%	11
	Other Non-Manual/Skilled Manual	42%	45%	13
	Other	23%	28%	7

	Manual			
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(We describe the cohorts in more detail below). In addition to the qualitative life story interviews, we also completed detailed life history calendars with each respondent, together with simple personal network schedules spanning different life phases. In designing our data collection strategy, we envisaged that linking multiple sources of information in this way would have a number of advantages:

(1) By drawing respondents from a nationally representative panel survey, we are able to locate and select our cases more precisely than is normally true in qualitative research designs, and to identify the extent of bias in our sample.

(2) In linking quantitative data to the qualitative interviews we could discover that those who opted in to our study were somewhat more likely to be female, middle-class with higher than average levels of education, and to have greater levels of social capital (as measured by frequency of contact with others and degree of trust in public institutions) than the population as a whole. There is an under-representation of those from working class backgrounds. More detailed analysis revealed a fairly consistent pattern of over-representation of professional and managerial occupations and under-representation of those in poverty or more marginal labour force statuses in our sample of interviewees.

However, while respondents in other social categories are numerically under-represented in our sample, we are confident that we have sufficient cases to facilitate situated qualitative analyses that are not grossly unrepresentative of the population as a whole

Macro-sociological accounts of social change tend to impute either rational-choice or culturally determined motives for innovative social behaviour. By

contrast, the strength of micro-sociological, qualitative approaches lies in their ability to generate detailed information on actors' own strategies and interpretations. By linking qualitative life stories to panel survey data, we aimed to generate a complex database that would link macro- and micro-level understandings of social action, and enable social scientists to better explain the dynamic interplay of individual motivation, social structure, and cultural and temporal location in the production of social change.

In adding a life history calendar instrument to our life story interview, our objective was to improve our capacity to link qualitative stories more precisely to the chronology of individual lives, and to their historical context. The calendar also helped to fill in gaps in the biographical information on our respondents available to us from the Living in Ireland survey.

While our research design emphasized the potential of linking macro-quantitative with micro-qualitative data in the identification and selection of cases, we did not, perhaps, anticipate the extent to which treating individual lives as holistic cases created the possibility of combining different data sources in innovative ways. In particular, we did not appreciate the richness of the individual level detail contained in the panel survey data. Some recent life course research has emphasized the value of treating lives as wholes, rather than as disaggregated sets of transitions and states (Elliott 2005). In addition, a small number of researchers have explored the possibility of mobilizing the narrative potential embedded in quantitative longitudinal data sets by (re)constructing individual lives as cases for interpretive or formal qualitative analysis (Singer *et al* 1988, Dumais, 2005). In this paper, we want to suggest ways in which this process of the narrative construction of lives using multiple data sources might be used to address current research questions about the changing shape of social lives in late modernity.

Turning points and trajectories in the life courses?

Our approach in this paper is to examine the analytical tools of turning points and trajectories and to assess their usefulness in understanding the intersection of individual lives with historical time.

Trajectories

Trajectories are described by Abbott (2001: 248) as having an “inertial historicist character”. For Abbott (2001) social processes are comprised of a “a number of programmed inertial trajectories, with strong constraints on their number and desirability” (p248). Much life course research is concerned with the changing nature of these trajectories and with the way in which social change takes the form of alterations in the timing and sequencing of transitions and phases across individual lives (Elder, 1994; Hareven, 1981).

Brueckner and Mayer (2005) identified four closely related concepts that are used to discuss change in the life course. In particular, these concepts address changes in the experience of education, work, the family and the state:

Institutionalization centres on the effects of normative, legal or organizational rules on the stages, states, events and transitions within peoples lives (for example, a clear separation and progression from education to employment).

Standardization refers to the processes by which specific states, events or sequences become more universal for a given population. As a result of these processes, people’s lives become more predictable (for example, age at first marriage occurs at an increasingly ‘normative’ age; compulsory retirement at age 65 marks the end of formal employment throughout the population).

Differentiation refers to an increase in the number of distinct stages or states across a life time (for example, the proliferation of distinct

educational 'stages' in the early part of the life course).

Individualization, whereby there are wider varieties of life courses that are driven by individuals taking greater control over their lives. This concept is particularly associated with the scholarship of Ulrich Beck (Beck 1992, Atkinson, 2007).

Within these debates, the timing of turning points is considered to be an important predictor of later outcomes. For example, using cross-national survey data from the European Community Household Panel, Whelan and Maitre (2007: 201) found that 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 otherwise affected by disadvantageous socio-economic circumstances. Similarly Elder (1974) highlighted how the second World War often proved to be a key turning point for disadvantaged youth as the G.I. Bill opened up educational opportunities that previously had been unavailable.

Turning points

Turning points for Elder can result in radical shifts: "Chance events, and choices under the right circumstances, can set in motion a cascade of positive experiences and opportunities that literally change the course of a person's life trajectory (2000: 181) or can represent stages along such regular trajectories (1985). Abbott (2001) has focused more than most on the character of these moments of change, the turning points between trajectories within individual lives. He makes a number of observations. Firstly turning points are critical moments when there is a change of trajectory. Secondly they can only be identified in hindsight, after the event. Life histories are therefore a suitable tool for identifying turning points. Thirdly, turning points have a source, a point in time at which they begin. However movement from trajectory to trajectory is largely an arbitrary matter; if opportunities arise, and people are willing to avail of them, then a turning point will occur. Turning points depend on "constraints and vacancies, on availability

and choice " (p248). Fourthly they don't occur instantaneously, but have duration in time, some transitions from one trajectory to another take longer than other's to complete. He outlines four different types of turning points

1. A move from one stable trajectory to another stable trajectory (*Standard Inter-trajectory Turning Point*)
2. A move from a period of randomness to a stable trajectory (*Focal Turning Point*)
3. A move from a stable trajectory to a period of randomness (*Randomizing Turning Point*)
4. A turning point whose outcome is dependent on the internal sequence of the turning point (*Contingent Turning Point*)

As mentioned above, for Abbot, "what makes trajectories, trajectories is their inertial quality, their quality of enduring large amounts of minor variation without any appreciable change in overall direction or regime". Much life history research, certainly that concerned with trajectories, conceptualizes them as institutional states, such as work, unemployment and education. By random trajectory Abbott, thinking in terms of standard statistical modeling, means a period in which the 'standard casual models did not predict future outcome' (p249). He illustrates the idea of randomness by citing an example from Sampson and Laub's (1993) work on young offenders in which random trajectories are those which involve "occasional criminality, mixtures of employment experiences, and successions of social support and friendship networks", while stable trajectories are those which are organised "one job, one spouse, one way of life" (249)

A random trajectory, therefore is a period of time in which no one state dominates and there is random movement between states. Abbot doesn't address the implications of whether some types of turning points pre-dominate

over others. This paper will consider this issue and assess how useful are these categorizations of turning points are for understanding the intersections between history and biography, both in terms of the life-course as it is lived and the life course as it is perceived by individuals.

According to Abbott, in peoples' narratives the rarer turning points are seen as more significant than the more normal, unchanging states. People are aware of and identify moments of change, more than moments of stasis: "Paradoxically, individual actors experience the casually comprehensible trajectories as less important and less consequential than the less comprehensible turning points." (248). This is not to say that turning points are unimportant, they are significant as they represent a movement to a new state. However the key difference between trajectories and turning points for Abbot is predictability. Trajectories are "causally comprehensible" while turning points are "causally incomprehensible" (p248). He argues that it is the very randomness of turning points that leads them to make more of an impression than the everyday routine of the normal trajectories of life.

In this paper, we examine life histories from the viewpoints of trajectories and turning points. We additionally focus on the nature of turning points, particularly those turning points precipitated by historical processes. We suggest that the strategy of examining life narratives as whole cases can yield additional insights into the complex interrelationships amongst changing historical circumstances and the differential effects of both decision-making at key turning points, and of the experience of structural constraints across individual lives. In order to illustrate our argument, we begin by locating the birth cohorts examined in our study in historical context.

Lives and historical times: the LHSC birth cohorts

We interviewed respondents from within three birth cohorts of people who participated in the Living in Ireland study in each year from 1994 to 2001. Members of the oldest cohort were born before 1935. When they were growing up during the late thirties and early forties, Ireland was characterized by a comparatively weak, rural economy. This was, however, a period of substantial growth in domestic manufacturing due to the imposition of protectionist policies, and some expansion in social welfare provision. While Ireland benefited from the receipt of Marshall Aid in the aftermath of WW2, by the time many in this cohort were entering early adulthood, the structural weaknesses in the policy of import-substitution were exposed, and economic growth stagnated (Eipper, 1987).

Our second cohort (born 1945-1954) grew to adulthood during a period of economic growth after state policy changed in favour of opening the economy to foreign direct investment. This was also a period of rapid increase in the provision of social welfare, although our respondents would generally have been too old to avail of the opportunity presented by the introduction of free secondary education in 1967. Both mean age at marriage and average family size were falling rapidly when many in this cohort were forming families of their own during the 1970s. While they enjoyed the opportunities presented by economic growth and enhanced state provision in early adulthood, our respondents in this cohort encountered tougher times in their middle years, during the recession of the 1980s, when the members of our youngest birth cohort (1965-1974) were growing up. This was a period of high unemployment and emigration, but also of rapid liberalization in the laws and values surrounding sexual and family life. By the time many of those in our youngest cohort were entering the labour market economic growth was surging forward in the context of the emerging Celtic Tiger. These respondents established their own families during a period of relative stability in family life trends,

characterized by an increase in the marriage and birth rates (including a small increase in fertility). The 1990s were also characterized by a marked shift towards neo-liberal economic policies, including privatization, de-regulation, and withdrawal of state from key aspects of social provision, such as housing.

Reconstructing life narratives from multiple sources

In the remainder of this paper, we wish to focus on the experience of this cohort (born 1945-1954), by presenting portions of reconstructed life narratives for two of our respondents. Our purpose is to illustrate how we plan to engage in systematic analysis of our cases, in order to examine the changing shape of lives in 20th century Ireland.

Our approach is essentially *comparative*: we seek to identify similarities and variations in the life trajectories of respondents who experienced a change in trajectory at a particular historical time. We will then continue to add cases until a point of 'saturation' is reached, and it is possible to identify the most parsimonious set of 'generic life histories' or 'collective stories' (see Elliott 2005) within each category. In seeking to construct 'collective stories' we are interested, not just in the formal chronology of states and transitions in people's lives, but also in the ways that they made sense of the shapes of their lives – in the context of changing sets of values and orientations that shaped and were shaped by transformations in the cultural, economic and institutional environment. In particular, we are interested in tracing the emergence of innovative 'ways of seeing' that created the possibility of new modes of social life.

In order to frame lives as *cases* for comparison, we plan to construct theoretically informed, composite sequential narratives of our respondents' lives, situated in historical time, drawing together information from each of the four data sets (i.e. life stories, life calendars, social network schedules and responses

to the panel survey questionnaire). Hereafter, we call these reconstructed life narratives '*life maps*.' These have the advantage both of creating broadly similar units for comparison and of bringing together multiple data sources at the level of individual cases, allowing us to mobilize data collected for different purposes in unconventional ways, for the purpose of treating lives as wholes according to the logic of the comparative method (Ragin 1987).

We also suggest that this approach helps to situate lives more precisely in historical time because, through it, narrative segments from the life stories can be linked more precisely to life timing and sequencing by combining them with information from the life calendars. Finally, bringing together information from multiple, sometimes overlapping sources, has the potential to improve the validity and reliability of our life narratives, by offering the opportunity to cross-reference details and fill in gaps. However, as we discuss in our conclusion, because the different data sources typically generate different types of error, there is also the danger that, in some cases, errors are multiplied and aggravated, rather than limited.

The 'life map' strategy described above is similar to that deployed by Laub and Sampson (1993), who developed complex profiles of individual lives based on combinations of quantitative variables and rich qualitative material from a longitudinal study of delinquency, in order to illuminate the processes that resulted in either persistence of desistance from criminal activity across the life course. Similarly, we hope to link information about how respondents themselves made sense of the constraints and opportunities they faced at key transitions to formal information about the sequencing of their life paths. By doing this we hope to illuminate how varying experiences of class inequality and poverty in childhood and across the transition to adulthood (within and across cohorts) lead to differences in trajectories and turning points which contributed to differences in the impact of historical processes (such as a major recession) on

the respondent lives. In this way we hope to shed light on why, in different socio-economic and policy contexts, for some people poverty represented a transitory experience, while for others it represented a cumulative life path.

Selecting cases for narrative reconstruction

In order to select cases for narrative reconstruction, we propose to adopt the nested, hierarchical strategy developed by Lieberman (2005). This entails an initial analysis of the Living in Ireland survey data in order to situate respondents in each of our cohorts according to key variables and trends within the population as a whole.

For the purposes of this example we compared respondents' responses to two questions. Firstly did the respondent experience any periods of unemployment prior to 1995 (the first wave of interviews). This selected for those who had experienced a turning point, namely job loss, at a particular historical time, that is the pre-Celtic tiger recession. Secondly how difficult their households found it to make ends meet in 2001 (the last wave of interviews). This allowed us to identify those who perhaps experienced different trajectories in response to the recession.

On the basis of this initial categorization, we selected two respondents from our middle cohort for presentation in this illustration, both of whom described their households as making ends meet 'with great difficulty' in childhood, and experienced unemployment in the period before 1995. In 1995 both households were also described as making ends meet with 'some' or 'great' difficulty. However by 2001, one respondent was able to answer "fairly easy" to the same question, while another continued to experience "great difficulty". We anticipate that the case selection procedure will be *iterative*; that is, that after an initial examination of cases, we will return to the Living in Ireland Survey with new questions in order to refine our case selection strategy.

Layte and Whelan (2003) analysed five waves of the European

Community Household Panel survey, from 1994 to 1998, looking at transitions in and out of poverty. (As noted above, our indicative respondents were part of that survey.) Their study demonstrated two advantages of using longitudinal data: it highlighted that the experience of poverty was both far wider and more concentrated on a particular population than is appreciated from the analysis of cross-sectional data. They then attempt to identify the factors that lead individuals in and out of poverty, and argue for a focus on transitions. However, the nature of the panel data makes it possible to look only at very limited *types* of transitions. They focus on two: change in income, and changes in the number of children. Doing this they discover that changes in income are more important than changes in number of children in precipitating movements in and out of poverty. While this is interesting, the conclusion that reductions in income cause movements into poverty is somewhat limited from a whole life perspective. They later broaden their analysis to argue that the type of welfare regime in which these reductions occur also influences whether the income reduction will result in poverty. Incorporating qualitative data on experiences and motivations should allow us to investigate the nature of these transitions further.

John: Disappointed Entrepreneur

Our first respondent, who we call John, was born in 1951 into a typical small farm rural environment in the west of Ireland, he was one of six and describes the requirement for children to contribute labour from an early age as “not tough it was normal.” While he identified his household in childhood as making ends meet ‘with great difficulty’ on the Living in Ireland Survey, in the Life Story interview he identifies a number of features that made his family somewhat better off than his neighbours: because both his grandfather and father worked for local authorities, the family had access to a house and wage making them less dependent on agriculture for survival. This respondent identified a number of

key transitions in his life, most of which reflect, in Abbott's terms standard inter-trajectory turning points (2002), that is a movement from one stable trajectory to another; moves from education to employment, employment to self-employment and back again.

At a young age John took advantage of a training opportunity provided by a state agency to get a primary sector job in Ireland, but quite shortly thereafter (in the late 1960s), emigrated to England to work on building sites with his brother. Finding that his fiancée was pregnant, he returned to Ireland and did well in the construction industry, getting contracts with the state for building social housing, and with the emerging multinational sector. While he hit some problems in the late 1970s, a real crisis came in the 1980s when tax problems forced him to re-emigrate to England, leaving his family behind "because the kids were comin' to college age and that but I said I wasn't going to be caught not being able to provide for them..." He returned to Ireland in the early 1990s when he described his household as making ends meet "with some difficulty" on the Living in Ireland Survey, and continued to work as a builder during most of the Celtic Tiger period.

This move to England and back to Ireland, can perhaps be considered a Contingent Turning Point, in that the nature of the trajectory was dependent on the internal sequence of the turning point (in this case, the changing government policy on tax, and the respondents' responses to this).

In his early 50's he takes up unskilled employment with a local government agency. At the time of his interview he described himself as in good circumstances and as making preparations for a comfortable old age,

A number of features stand out about this respondent's life map with respect to moving in and of different economic circumstances. First, there were hidden 'advantages' in his childhood that were obscured by his responses to the Living in Ireland Survey. Second, while we are aware that perception of ability to make ends meet is a subjective measure – and we plan to incorporate more

objective indices in our ongoing analysis – this life story highlights the significance of complex variations in the experience of social class and economic disadvantage across the life course. For example, the subtle advantages experienced by his family in childhood, and his ability to mobilize strategic network connections at different life phases, highlights potentially significant factors for explaining why economic difficulty may represent either a transitory or cumulative experience. Finally, while this respondent was clearly an “innovator” in many respects – for example, he adopted an entrepreneurial approach to his life from a young age; he was happy to talk about his wife’s pregnancy before they were married; and he had begun to reject formal religion and was proud of his lone-parent daughter at the time of the interview – his trajectory of upward mobility was stymied by his experience of recession in the 1980s, just before his family were ready to leave home. His hopes that his own children would attain a higher educational standard than his own were somewhat unfulfilled. In response to the question “how much do you think you’ve been able to shape your own life?” he concluded that: *“I suppose if you look at it and think about it you’d say very much so but after what life threw you just changed direction and shaped it that way. I cannot say that any circumstance left me sittin’ at home wonderin’, ‘when is this goin’ to change’ I didn’t wait like that, I went and changed it, so...its gone in different directions but in a straight forward way. It’s very, very simple if the work isn’t at home, that’s the way we came up, if it’s not at home you travel ‘till you find it and if you have work you have everything else.”*

Seán: A constrained life

The second respondent, Seán, is slightly older, born six years earlier than the first respondent. There are similarities in the two lives. Like John, he grew up in a rural area, with four siblings. Like John he identified that his family had ‘difficulty making ends meet’ in childhood. He describes rural poverty, living in

a house without running water or electricity and bare furnishings. In both cases, access to home grown vegetables meant that they did not go hungry as children. Like John, Seán's father was a waged employee. He worked in England however, and his absences colour Seán's account of his life, as does his sense that his father did not adequately provide for the family. He says his mother

"struggled to survive, any money she had was for us. I remember one time they told me that she says to Dad 'That coat, heather, is it old now and it's time I got a new one' and you know what he says back to her 'is there any holes in it?' No coat. ... And all the likes of that, yeah we got on as children like you know but we actually had absolutely nothing, we had nothing."

Like John, Seán identifies class differences in the treatment of children in the schoolroom and regrets his lack of education, but places the blame for that on his father, who refused to pay to send him to a local secondary school, sending him for cheaper vocational education instead. Like John he follows a family member (his father) to work in the building trade in the UK. Both John and Seán talk about the importance of working hard; however Seán's work career is quite different. There are much more focal and randomising turning points in his life, as he moves between periods of stability and randomness.

As work with his father comes to an end, he returns to Ireland to take care of his mother (who had persistent health problems). Eventually he discontinues working with his father and begins working on his own on a number of jobs related to the building industry. On a visit home to Ireland he suffers a knee injury that prevents him working again in the building trade. This leads to a period of randomness, as he mixes occasional employment and unemployment with caring for his mother. He obtains work in a local factory, and in a key turn, loses it four years later, following an attempt to unionise the workplace. His story focuses strongly on this turning point, the failed attempt to unionise. This job loss proved to be important, as it occurred in the mid-seventies, a time of

high and growing unemployment as the world wide recession hit Ireland. A year later his father, who had by this time, returned to the family home, dies. There follows another period of randomness, as Seán takes on a new role as the primary carer of his mother who dies three year later. During this period Seán occasionally obtains short-term manual work.

Seven years later, at the age of 40 he meets his wife and marries. Much of his life account is the story of his courtship with his wife “ *I never dreamt one day that I would get married ...*

... I thought you see with all the life I had with me father and his carry on and that, I thought more or less that I would be inferior to any girl do you know what I mean that I would have not been good enough. “

Although the trajectory of his life does not change, it seems clear that this is an important turning point, in terms of providing Seán with a key relationship which he had been lacking. In the network analysis question, respondents were asked who was important to them at certain periods of their lives. Seán answered only his mother and later his wife (and unusually, and perhaps reflecting his social isolation and his experience as an Irish labourer in England, he also included Martin Luther King and Muhammad Ali). However, using the criteria of trajectories outlined above, this would not be considered a turning point, which raises questions as to what we mean by turning points in their qualitative sense.

At the age of 53 he joins a government employment training scheme, which he identifies as an important turning point. This would seem to be a contingent turning point, as the experience of the turn itself, changed the outcome of the sequence. Rather than resulting in a transition to employment, it heightened Seán’s sense of isolation from the labour market, and he feels contributed to depression he suffered later. This depression he describes as delayed reaction to the death of his mother. As a result, at 60 he received a disability pension, and at

the time of the interview two years later was depending on this income, and experiencing poverty which contributed to social isolation “*The income is not much, we have to watch every penny, none of us smoke and none of us drink, very little drink I take. I don’t know when I was in a pub last.*” When asked how much he was able to kind of follow his choices: He says “*not much*”.

Discussion

There are two aspects to this paper. Firstly how do people conceive of the relative importance of trajectories and turning points, and secondly, is Abbot’s framework for understanding turning points, useful in understanding different experiences and understandings of the life course.

1. Understandings of trajectories and turning points

In these lives we can see that Abbott’s contention that turning points are often random (illness, unexpected caring responsibilities) holds true. However, in the life histories presented, we can see that while our respondents told their stories in terms of trajectories connected by turning points neither saw the standard inter-trajectory turning points as more important than the trajectories. Both highlight underlying structural constraints, for example they identify lack of educational opportunity in their childhood as important as is the poor job prospects in the 1970s and 1980s. While Abbot is correct that life stories are told by focusing on turning points, this focus on the boundaries between states, the moments of change, often tell us about what lies outside the boundaries. Speaking of the spatial borders between countries, O’Dowd comments that:

Their significance is established in narratives through which people come to know and understand their social world, constructing their social identities in the process. Borders are tools for thinking with as well as

phenomena to be studied (O'Dowd 2003: 8).

This is as true in terms of time as it is in space. Turning points, in providing the contrast between two states, often illuminate the nature of the states themselves. So while neither explicitly refer to the recession at the time, in their discussion of turning points, it becomes evident that they are both aware of the recession as a social reality that is bigger than their own lives, that their personal problems are public issues. Their sense of the social structure of society becomes particularly evident when they reflect on the Celtic Tiger in Ireland, and their inability to benefit from it. Seán says

Well I don't have much prospects as I look at it because the way I look at life is this that it's not really that important to me life because the gap between the rich and poor are widening and widening while their trying to tell us its not ... why people in trolleys in hospitals and their almost dying in them in the year 2007. While there's billionaires all over the place and millionaires.

While John says

"if you were small and the tax man could cripple ya but the people who defrauded this country the tax man never left a hand on them. The Larry Goodman's and those and the Ben Dunnes " ... "Celtic tiger to me - nothing- it hasn't meant anything to literally any of us."

2. Nature of Turning Points

However, far from identifying turning points as more important than periods of stability, some important turning points were not identified as such by respondents. For example a key turning point for Seán was the loss of his job and the taking on of a carers role in his 30s the midst of a recession. The resulting poor

opportunities for employment possibly (given the links between poverty and mental illness) contributed to poor mental health, which led to social exclusion in older age.

This suggests that the Abbott framework, which categorises different types of turning points, is useful in that the nature of the turning point did seem to have an impact on how the life course was perceived. Whereas some standard inter-trajectory turning points were not seen as important, other types of turning point were seen as key by the respondents. This is particularly seen in the case of contingent turning points. Both respondents experienced contingent turning points that had long duration in their middle age. For both the contingent turning points were seen as important shaping their future decisions or experiences. John was in his early forties when a dispute with the tax authorities led him to leave to work in England. Though he returned in the early nineties, he feels as a result of this experience he did not set up his own development company so feels he missed out on the Celtic Tiger. Instead he returned to work as a contractor and took the decision in his early fifties to take a (early 2000 at the height of Celtic Tiger) he is able to get a secure public sector job to ensure he will have a comfortable old age.

In contrast, the contingent turning point for Seán occurs when he is in his early fifties in the late 1990s. He identifies it as contributing to his depression. The training course left him feeling alienated from the labour market, an alienation that is compounded by his age. The later occurrence in his life of this turning point made it harder for him to recover from the experience.

If we consider contingent turning points to be ones that are long in duration, as it would seem from these examples, then the possibility of recovering from negative change, depends on there being enough time in the life course to be able to return to more positive trajectories.

In terms of the respondent's sense of one's ability to control one's lives,

unsurprisingly, many random turning points would seem to result in both a sense of little overall control and poorer outcomes than a life in which there are more standard movements between clear trajectories. Both respondents have a sense of lives not lived. For John it is related to the career path he chose - not being a successful building entrepreneur. Seán, in contrast, has a much wider sense of things not done (not being a priest, a jockey, a teacher, wanting to help people in poorer countries). Here again perhaps, the randomness of the turning points experienced impact on the respondents' sense of possibilities and control.

A final methodological note

Each of our data sources has strengths and limitations. On the one hand, the challenges presented by the extent of error and omission in linking qualitative interviews to panel have been described in detail by Thompson (2004). However, in other analysis, we also found that life story interviews may contain serious omissions. This raises the possibility that, in some cases at least, combining information from multiple sources may compound and multiply error, rather than compensate for it.

However, we are convinced that qualitative life story data that sheds light on how particular life transitions and stages were experienced and interpreted by respondents can provide unexpected insights into the substantive content of responses to survey data, and draw our attention to unanticipated turning points and crises. This can lead researchers to ask new questions of longitudinal quantitative data, and in an iterative process, move backwards and forwards between the two ways of thinking about changing life courses in order to obtain a more accurate understanding of the process of social change.

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