Linking Lives and Shifting Contexts: Critical Reflections on Qualitative Life Course Methodologies

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the experience of two different methodologies for qualitative life course analysis: firstly, the elicited narratives of 22 older people in Buenos Aires focusing on their lifetime relations with their children and what this means for their current wellbeing; secondly, in-depth semi-structured interviews of 60 young adults in Zambia focusing on their life trajectories with respect to educational and employment choices, opportunities and experiences. In both methodologies, the role of linked lives and of wider social, economic and political changes was central.

The paper addresses three core themes: firstly, the challenges and opportunities of two approaches to making sense of widely disparate narratives of linked lives; secondly, two possibilities for engaging with the subjectivity of the narrative accounts of linked lives; thirdly, two approaches to exploring how individual experiences and the lives to which they are linked are rooted in wider shifts in social, economic and political contexts.

Introduction

This paper reflects on the experience of using two different methodologies for qualitative life course analysis[2] with attention on linked lives: firstly, the elicited narratives of 22 older people in Buenos Aires with respect to their lifetime relations with their children and their current wellbeing[3]; secondly, 60 in-depth semi-structured interviews of young adults in Zambia focusing on their life trajectories from birth, through youth to early adulthood with an emphasis on education and employment[4]. In both cases there was a strong emphasis on linked lives by exploring the role of family, friends and other individuals/institutions as well as on the influence of shifting social, political and economic contexts on individual experiences. In both cases only the primary research subject was interviewed[5], so although linked lives were a key preoccupation, these methodologies offer partial accounts as the children, grandchildren, parents and friends who feature in these accounts have no independent voice.

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[2] Our focus is qualitative life course methodology using a life history approach, namely retrospective biographical accounts of a life that have been elicited by a researcher (Watson and Watson-Franke 1985).

[3] This research was self-funded by Lloyd-Sherlock and Locke.

[4] This research, as discussed later, was commissioned by the World Bank but responsibility for any errors and opinions expressed remains with the authors.

[5] In the ageing research we were concerned that older individuals would not feel so free to express their opinions if they knew that we were also interviewing partners, children and grandchildren. In the economic empowerment of youth study interviewing parents, siblings, partners or individual's teachers or employees may have constrained young people to 'acceptable scripts' and taking this on would have presented unmanageable logistical problems for an already large study. In both cases, the resulting narratives show that it would have been difficult to determine a priori who it was most significant to interview, that those who were most accessible are not necessarily the most pertinent in the subjective accounts, and that many informants were highly dependent on or vulnerable to those to whom their lives were linked.

Table 1: Two Methodologies for Qualitative Life Course Analysis

Research Focus	Aim and key question	Methodology
Older people's lifetime relations with their children and their influence on current wellbeing (Lloyd-Sherlock and Locke 2008)	• Exploratory • How do lifetime relations with children influence older people's wellbeing?	• Elicited narrative, fairly 'free-flowing' by a principal investigator • 22 older men and women from a single socially-excluded neighbourhood of Buenos Aires in 2006
Young adults life trajectories with an emphasis on educational and employment choices, opportunities and experiences (Locke, Verschoor and Dudwick 2008)	• Diagnostic • What factors challenge or enhance the agency of young people in their quest for economic empowerment?	• Semi-structured interview combining open and closed questions by two field researchers • 60 young men and women purposively selected from three purposively selected sites in Zambia in 2007

Whilst these do not represent 'innovative' methodologies per se, they do represent dramatically under-scrutinised methodologies (Bornat 2002:121). In methodological terms, to varying degrees, both these experiences may be viewed by many qualitative life history researchers as heretical: in each case the researcher directed the account, shaped it in particular ways and variously 'interfered' with the unmediated story these informants might have told about their lives (Wengraf 2001). Furthermore, methods of analytical interpretation, again to varying degrees, selected and editing and re-presented these life stories, and thus might be perceived as destroying the essential integrity that is the key thing that individual subjective accounts have to offer (Watson and Watson-Franke 1985). However, the intention here is to argue that a more thematically focused and (thus directed) approach to qualitative life course analysis has a strong role to play in theoretical and policy-relevant research and that whilst such research may not follow the narrative-interpretive approach of many life history researchers this should not absolve us from critical scrutiny of these methodologies and the extent to which they are able to deliver insights that are both credible and valuable. Life course research remains marginal to established fields of research despite recent consolidations of ideas about this methodology (Levy and the Pavie Team 2005:3) or its longer roots within qualitative life history research (see for instance, Watson and Watson-Franke 1985).

This is certainly true for development studies, the field in which Peter and I predominantly work[6], despite the potential for life course analysis to add value to existing research methodologies. Development studies is an inter-disciplinary field of social science that addresses social and economic change with particular, but not exclusive, reference to developing countries. The life course paradigm (Elder 1995) like development studies values inter-disciplinarity highly. Life course analysis, with its emphasis on self-defined transitions, trajectories and turning points, offers important advantages for qualitative life history research in the varied cultural settings of developing countries in which existing expectations and experiences of life stages are often changing rapidly. The emphasis in life course analysis on subjective lives in changing contexts provides a methodology that is well orientated to pursue development studies' central concern with how lived subjectivities of lifetime experiences of poverty, exclusion and vulnerability are linked to these wider social factors (Davis 2006a:9). The potential for a strong analysis of inter-dependency through a focus on 'linked lives' (Elder 1974) resonates well with more relational notions of wellbeing in developing countries and helps to counter the tendency towards methodological individualism implicit in

[6] Catherine's disciplinary background is in sociology, anthropology and politics with a focus on gender. Peter is a social scientist who focuses on social policy with a special interest in the health sector, social protection and ageing.

mainstream neoliberal economics (Levy and the Pavie Team 2005:6). In contrast to static measures of wellbeing, life course analysis facilitates a dynamic view that is particularly valuable given development studies focus on how processes of change affect human experience over time.

Life history work within development studies has tended to adopted a semi-structured interview method that aims to "capture the concrete details of lives in context" (Cairns and Cairns 2002:292) without allowing data collection to be overwhelmed by standardised procedures in way that might destroy the 'intimacy' of narrative accounts (Davis 2006a). Paerregaard also argues that development research takes a 'life-focused approach' to qualitative life history that "allows us to regard the life story as a trace of some external reality that is more than the story itself" (1998:np) thus occupying a rather different epistemological terrain from more 'story-focused' approaches[7]. In this sense, the practice of qualitative life course analysis in development studies is somewhat 'heterodox'. Despite the increasing use of life course methodologies in development studies[8], the generally pragmatic orientation of this field has so far generated very little reflection on this methodology nor the implications of its heterodox nature (but see Baulch and Scott 2006, Hobcraft 2007, and DRC Migration, Globalisation and Poverty and the Innocenti Research Centre 2007).

The attempt here is then to make small contribution in this direction by explicitly reflecting on two contrasting methodological experiences with respect to their treatment of linked lives and dynamic contextual variables. We do this selectively to focus on three themes, whilst acknowledging that there remain a very large number of methodological concerns that we do not touch on that are also significant. Firstly, we look at the challenges and opportunities of two approaches to making sense of widely disparate narratives of linked lives (through common themes and cautious synthesis). Secondly, we explore two possibilities for engaging more fully with the subjectivity of the narrative accounts of linked lives (by probing the social construction of relations with family, friends and others and by combining analysis of today's retrospective accounts of these relations with an attempt to reconstruct these relations as they unfolded over 'real' time). Thirdly, we reflect on two approaches to exploring how individual experiences of purposively selected informants can be more effectively rooted in wider social, economic and political contexts (by nesting within secondary data and by probing informants' social norms). We conclude that ongoing reflection on more heterodox life course methodologies has significant potential to enhance the validity and credibility of life course research and the influence that it wields. As part of this, we argue that it is possible to strike a careful balance between deliberately unstructured narrative-interpretive methods and more pragmatic, focussed strategies. Moreover, we argue that reflection on life course methodology is a core part of the reflexivity that is critical to the integrity and validity of every qualitative research inquiry (Mason 2002).

Analysing multiple narratives of linked lives

Life histories, even of individuals within the same purposive category, are widely divergent in many respects, sometimes in almost every respect. The difficulty of tracking linked lives is made even more complicated, as many researchers have discovered, by the 'inconvenient'

[7] Rather than a more purely constructivist view of life stories as narrator's inventions, this epistemological space is more positivist although it is not confined to a single position and is rarely in fact entirely positivist, as we shall discuss later on.

[8] Applications in development studies are varied but have notably included the study of livelihood trajectories, experiences of wellbeing over lifetime, experiences of ageing, the impact of childhood poverty on later life, and lifetime migration experiences (such as Davis 2006b, Hobcraft 2007, Gardner 2002, Harriss and Osella 2008, Seeley 2008, Seeley and Tumwekwase forthcoming 2009, Whitehead et al 2007 and the TRANS-NET Project (2009-2011)).

tendency of relatives to get 'lost', to be forgotten, to be 'not spoken of', to die, to be adopted, to suddenly appear or re-appear in the respondents lives (for example, Kreager and Schroeder-Butterfill 2006). In each case our approach to tracking linked lives was respondent-centric: we focused on what our respondents' had to say about those who were important in their lives at various times, their relationships with them, and what it meant for them: we did not attempt to track the parallel lives of family and friends more broadly over time. Thus individual linked lives come in and out of focus throughout our interpretations of particular life courses and in this sense the dynamism or stability in the bundle of meaningfully linked lives represents a core part of the data to be analysed. Nevertheless variations in life trajectories, including in linked lives, pose serious challenges for making sense of a number of narratives, rather than of an individual narrative. We resolved the difficulty of making sense of widely disparate narratives of linked lives in contrasting ways in the two projects. Our choices were guided partly by the intentions of the project and by the relative strengths of our methodologies.

The work with older people was primarily explorative in intent and the relatively free-flowing narratives provided a rich understanding of how they viewed their lives and their lifetime relations with various children and others. Our conceptual methodology evolved from an initial interest in tracing the direct links between life course fertility and later life wellbeing to more complex and nuanced appreciations about parent's current views of links to their different children's lives across time. As an exploratory study sited within a specific neighbourhood, our sample was chosen opportunistically through a gatekeeper who was also a resident of that neighbourhood[9]. We did not attempt a synthesis of narratives in this case, but instead focused on analysing common themes within the narratives, namely commonalities and differences in how informants referred to particular relationships, turning points or changes in circumstances as significant or not. In presenting our analysis we choose to foreground contrasting pairs of individual narratives to give a detailed treatment of the themes and then to follow this with a more generalised but brief account of how that theme appeared in the wider group of narratives. This approach preserved much of the integrity of individual life histories whilst enabling us to explore the variety of experiences of linked lives within the wider group.

Almost every informant had a child who had gone through a serious life crisis that had impacted on the informant's wellbeing, but these impacts varied in their severity. For example, the event of the loss of a child was identified by some as a turning point in their lives, but for others it was not. To illustrate this we contrasted the experience of Carlos (79 years) and Daniela (68 years):

> Carlos was devastated by his only son's death, particularly bitter because it occurred when his wife's child bearing was complete. Although he still feels his loss keenly, his grief has been tempered by the discovery that the son had left a child with whom Carlos has since established an ongoing relationship. In contrast, the loss of one of her sons was not so shattering for Daniela. The key turning point in her life was her conversion at the age of 49 years to evangelical Christianity in the wake of a different sort of crisis: her youngest son, Ruben, being abandoned by his wife and children. The inner strength she drew from her religion enabled her to cope with the subsequent death of her son, Luis, after a long history of illness and alcohol abuse. For Carlos the chief pains and pleasures of his life were his relations with his children and despite grief for his son, he has close relationship with his two daughters and his understanding of his relationship with his grandchildren is at times

[9] The gatekeeper was asked to identify people who considered themselves to be 'old people'. The 17 women and 5 men interviewed ranged from 57 to 80 years, with 20 aged over 60 years. The sample size was loosely arrived at to strike a balance between a degree of data saturation, the rather limited time that Peter could spend in the field, and wanting to construct a convincingly gendered perspective despite our initial focus on older women. Most interviews were conducted in the gatekeeper's own house and usually entailed a single meeting. The fieldwork took place in August 2006.

> parental. For Daniela, religion supplemented and to some extent substituted, social relationships with children for those formed through the church giving her substantial resilience in the face of a child's death (précised from Lloyd-Sherlock and Locke 2008).

The disadvantages of this strategy for interpreting and then reporting our data were that in some senses these fore-grounded accounts can be seen as 'standing for' the wider data set, even though no claims were made as to their representativeness. Nevertheless, it is clear that some of the narratives were under-utilised in the analysis raising questions about the justification for selection of the fore grounded analyses and additionally that only a relatively small proportion of the data is available for academic scrutiny by others (the detail of the remaining 18 narratives on that theme being in effect concealed). This approach is premised on the belief that within life history work:

> "To understand some of the complexities, complications and confusion within the life of just one member of a community is to gain insights into the collective. In saying this we are not invoking an essentialist claim that to understand (however partially) *one* is to understand *all*. Rather, we are suggesting that every in-depth exploration of an individual life-in-context brings us much closer to understanding the complexities of lives in communities" (Cole and Knowles 2001:11).

Whilst this technique of focusing on a very selective number of cases for reporting data is established academic practice within certain circles where the value of qualitative research is well accepted[10], it has serious implications for developing the credibility of this methodology for a wider audience[11]. The strategy adopted in the second study does some way to addressing that audience's concerns but with certain costs, including most significantly the extent to which it solicited and preserved stories that individuals wanted to tell about their lives.

The intention of the youth life histories research was to provide a diagnostic insight for policy makers. The focus on the economic empowerment of youth was a given but from the outset this included an interest in processes of dis-empowerment and the framing idea proved sufficiently broad and open to accommodate to a very large degree a life course analysis. The diagnostic imperative militated towards a much larger sample size, a purposive sample of more and less successful youth from three contrasting sites[12], a semi-structured interview format and a much greater degree of synthesis of narratives. These methodological choices both hindered and enabled the synthesis: 60 in-depth interviews produced around 4,000 pages of data that were labour intensive to code and analyse even with the help of qualitative analysis software but the purposive sampling and the semi-structured nature of the life histories provided structure that facilitated the synthesis. In particular we constructed different categories of the young people's progress towards economic success (see table 2) that we

[10] The orthodoxy of presented a few cases to stand for the many is illustrated by Shenk et al (2002) which relies on two cases.

[11] A research proposal based on this methodology was heavily criticised by quantitative gerontologists who saw little merit in qualitative life histories and viewed the proposed sample size (of 60) as too small. In contrast, the journal publishing the paper from this study requested we reduce our commentary on methodology because they regarded it as so well recognised as not to need justification.

[12] The purposive criteria included gender (male and female), location (urban Lusaka, rural Eastern and industrialised Copperbelt[12]), and kinds of employment (seven categories including the unemployed). Because our intention was to explore *how* young Zambians progress along a path towards economic empowerment, our sample was heavily biased towards urban areas and to young Zambians who are employed. For example, 30% of our sample are in formal employment as compared to only 17% of all Zambians over 12 years of age. This bias is much greater for women than for men, as women are equally represented in our sample. Young people fitting the purposive criteria were identified from work and public places by two interviewers, with attention paid to avoiding the clustering of interviewees by moving around different locations in each research site.

used to make sense of their trajectories in comparison to their original circumstances and way markers along the route, such as educational achievement.

Table 2: Analytical categories of progress towards economic success (Locke et al 2008:8)

Category	Defining characteristics
Already successful	Already earn high salaries and have strong prospects for the future.
Going places	Earn good salaries. Although everyone in this group has completed high school only some have any tertiary education, and they are likely to improve their economic position in the future.
Solid start	Earn fair salaries, but while they have made a solid start in either employment, self-employment or business, they are yet to establish a secure position, complete their training, or realise their potential.
May have potential	Earn lower, but reasonably secure salaries, either from skilled or supervisory positions, from informal employment or self-employment. These *young Zambians* have yet to get on the path to success but have aspirations or are otherwise unproven and may yet be able to do so.
Little potential	Earn lower or variable salaries in low skilled or low paid jobs in the informal or formal sector or through self-employment. These *young Zambians* have little potential to progress economically from where they stand at the moment, but they are working.
Unable to find a job	Unable to attain appropriate employment over considerable periods of time and describe themselves as 'unemployed'[13]. They may or may not be actively seeking employment. Som do 'nothing', some do subsistence farming or take on piece-work in the informal sector, while others earn more substantial income from inconsistent or informal activities unrelated to their career aspirations. These *young Zambians* have little or no relevant experience.
Economically excluded	Earning nothing or very little and living in chronically poor households. This group are highly excluded from mainstream society and are trapped in severe poverty.

This categorisation was based upon a combination of emic and etic criteria to respond sensitively to engage with the real experiences of informants and the desire to inform up-stream policy makers through the study. They were not intended however as a 'model' life course nor to infer linear progression towards economic success. The life histories revealed that there was considerable potential for young Zambians to leap over several rungs if they succeeded in business or in getting a good job as well as to slide down several rungs if their business failed or they lost their job. Importantly the categories facilitated a disaggregated analysis of a large data set. For example, they were useful for us in exploring why losing a parent was critical in determining the path of some young people but made relatively little impact for others.

> "Half in our sample made reference to adverse family circumstances during childhood or while growing up: the death of one or both parents, divorce, and neglect or abuse…. In these circumstances, the availability of alternative sponsors to 'pick up' children, 'take' them to school and importantly also provide a loving and supportive environment appear to be critical to shaping childhood experiences. The *young Zambians* who faced difficult events but who found adoptive homes that conferred advantages (financial security, educational continuity, loving support) were insulated against severe repercussions for their life path while others who were not so fortunate faced extreme difficulties (financial hardship, educational disruption or truncation, neglect, discrimination and abuse). …even parental death was not necessarily disastrous for children or young people: rather the impact depends largely on the emotional and financial security that their remaining family networks can offer." (Locke et al 2008:38-39)

[13] Self-definition as 'unemployed' is key to this category of progress toward economic success. Our interest here is in young people's self-perceptions and as a result this category is not equivalent to standard ILO type definitions of unemployment. Indeed, only some in our category of 'unable to find a job' are 'doing nothing'. Others are involved in activities to make money but what distinguishes them from those in other categories who have taken up self-employment or employment is that this group are not willing to define their occupations in terms of those income-generating activities (they perceive these as secondary, they are not professionally relevant) and they see themselves as seeking or waiting for 'proper' work or business opportunities.

This is of course not unproblematic: the structure that facilitates the synthesis is also the framework that we researchers have imposed upon the stories that these informants might otherwise tell and the synthesis itself is not without a cost in terms of destroying the integrity of individual life histories. This was controlled to some extent by the careful attempt to capture and interpret the range of experiences 'within group' (using pseudonyms) and to highlight nuances and ambiguities therein with highly selective use of verbatim quotation[14]. For example, on the impact of parental divorce we note that:

> "While those who stayed with their father after divorce, like Simon, Abraham and Joseph, were less likely to see divorce as a key turning point in their early lives, this was not the case for Rose ('economically excluded') and for Jones ('may have potential') as we saw above. Rose's father remarried and circumstances rapidly deteriorated for her at home as a result of systematic abuse and the legal situation surrounding the agreement of her parents' divorce meant that she was not able to seek refuge with her mother. Rose recalls that when 8 years old "I was being segregated a lot by my father. I was hated a lot by my father, my father loved my brothers a lot and my other sister […] I was always being beaten up by my father when he came back from work". Her step-mother also abused her, forcing her to do housework late at night and early in the morning. Things got even worse when Rose became pregnant as a schoolgirl." (Locke et al 2008:37)

Nevertheless our framework was orientated to exploring factors enabling or constraining economic empowerment and in this sense 'muted' (Ardener 1975) to some degree the experiences of less successful or unsuccessful youth who could not 'talk our talk'. Our design was therefore limited in its capacity to explore the ways that unsuccessful youth thought about their own lives even though traces of these frameworks were visible in their open-ended answers. This was apparent in the frequent mention by youths that they were 'just sitting' or 'just waiting' or were 'squeezing themselves in'. In Zambia, to be 'just sitting' is about being economically unproductive or dependent and involves a moral judgement of being useless[15]. Becoming economically productive or self-sustaining is a key aspect of the transition to adulthood in Zambia and a crucial requirement for a man to be able to marry. It is distinct from 'just waiting' (for opportunities to come along or for husbands to give them a little capital) because although also inactive this waiting was for something, it was purposeful. An illustration of its moral value was clear when one informant asked about his employment told us that he was 'just waiting and going to church'. Unable to build independent incomes, many urban youth remained living with older relatives, including parents but often uncles. Unable to contribute economically to the household their presence is resented, and sometimes reflected in discriminatory access to food, and their continued residence is insecure if other (earning) relatives need somewhere to live. "Squeezing themselves in" betrays their everyday experience of shame at still being burdens reliant on the whim of their families. As Calves et al (2009: 122) show, the 'fuzzy transitory states' in which these youth find themselves may seem to 'defy analysis' because they don't conform to expected pathways but they are increasingly central to developing a better understanding of urban youth in African cities.

The stronger input by researchers into shaping the narratives of the respondents represented in some sense a loss, but facilitated a greater synthesis of data. However, this synthesis itself

[14] These selections are reliant on researcher discretion and tensions have to be managed between 'cherry-picking' quotations and offering a more balanced portrayal.

[15] Lucy sees her tailoring job as better than "sitting and doing nothing"; Tamara was widowed and, together with her sister, she supports her parents, her two children, two brothers in school as well as two sisters who "just sit" and so she complains "there is no one helping properly at home, because most of the people I have mentioned in my home, they just sit at home". Boniface regards himself as 'unemployed' but works as a porter to earn money to keep his wife, her two younger brothers and his child because (he says) his nephew, who also did this work, told him "that I can't just be sitting".

incurred further costs of a different nature: it was extremely labour-intensive, even with the use of qualitative analysis software, and the report of the analysis was extensive (200 pages). Although this study may be more convincing to a wider multi-disciplinary audience of policy makers, in terms of sample size and analytical 'rigour', its sheer scale creates barriers to its accessibility. The summary commissioned from a professional editor whilst skilful is inevitably largely stripped of the complexity, ambiguities and importantly the voices of the young people involved, thus making a dual output essential to preserve the value and integrity of the research whilst also addressing a broader audience. In this way the ethical principles guiding life course research, both 'to make it count' and to treat respondents and their accounts 'with respect', have direct implications for the 'artful' work of representing lives (Cole and Knowles 2001) in research outputs. Despite the more systematised analysis of the Zambia data, both interpretations remain dependent on the "unique position and perspective [of researchers]… to identify and make explicit themes and connections that give a particular shape and meaning to a body of material" (Cole and Knowles p. 115).

Taking a more rigorous approach to subjectivity

Despite their different methodological emphases both pieces of research sought a focus the ways individual respondents made sense of their lives. They were firmly embedded within what Paerregaard would call a broadly 'subjectivist' approach to life history (1998) in which "if we do not know the subjective meaning of lives we are comparing and evaluating then we cannot construct an adequate descriptive framework" (Watson and Watson-Franke 1985:28). However, the subjective accounts of life histories were not in either case simply 'taken at face value'. As Wengraf says, narrative methodologies reject the notion that "a person's explicit self-theory [is] sufficient for our purposes" (2008: 37). Whilst Wengraf's concern is expressed in terms drawn from psychology, development studies too both values subjectivity and simultaneously seeks to question it (cf. Paerregaard 1998). In both these pieces of research there was an attempt to both take subjectivity seriously and to go beyond treating the subjective account as fact.

In the ageing research we did not attempt to reconstruct factual accounts and instead explored the ways in which the life histories "involved informants 'storifying' their lives, so that they make sense for researcher (Reissman 1994:114). This methodological strategy enabled us to reveal "how older people use understandings of family relationships to make sense of their unfolding relations with children and their current wellbeing" (Lloyd-Sherlock and Locke 2008:1182). Respondents constructed particular children as successful, as struggling or as problematic and these social constructions were often contradictory and inconsistent and functioned to explain and in some cases justify older people's views of their lifetime or current relations with those children. For example:

> Eulogia talks about her daughters in very different ways. She is rather disparaging about four of them, comparing her own life of hard work and 'struggle' to these daughter's easy lives. She claims that these daughters are over-reliant on welfare handouts and are incompetent at managing their husband's money. She goes on to complain (somewhat contradictorily) that one of these daughters is too wrapped up in her own work to raise her children properly, and that this has caused one grandson to get involved in drugs and crime. Eulogia's youngest daughter is unmarried and still lives with her. She is very compassionate about this daughter, portraying her as sensitive, unworldly and good-hearted, and expresses concern that her daughter will be unable to cope with life when she becomes too old to look out for her. For Eulogia, key issues were whether her children shared her religious faith, whether she felt their ethic of struggle and hard work compared favourably with her own, and the extent to which she felt they could rely on each other at difficult times. Whilst there is a tradition of youngest daughters staying at home to care for ageing parents, Eulogia was keen to emphasise her youngest daughter's vulnerability and dependence on her. (précised from Lloyd-Sherlock and Locke 2008)

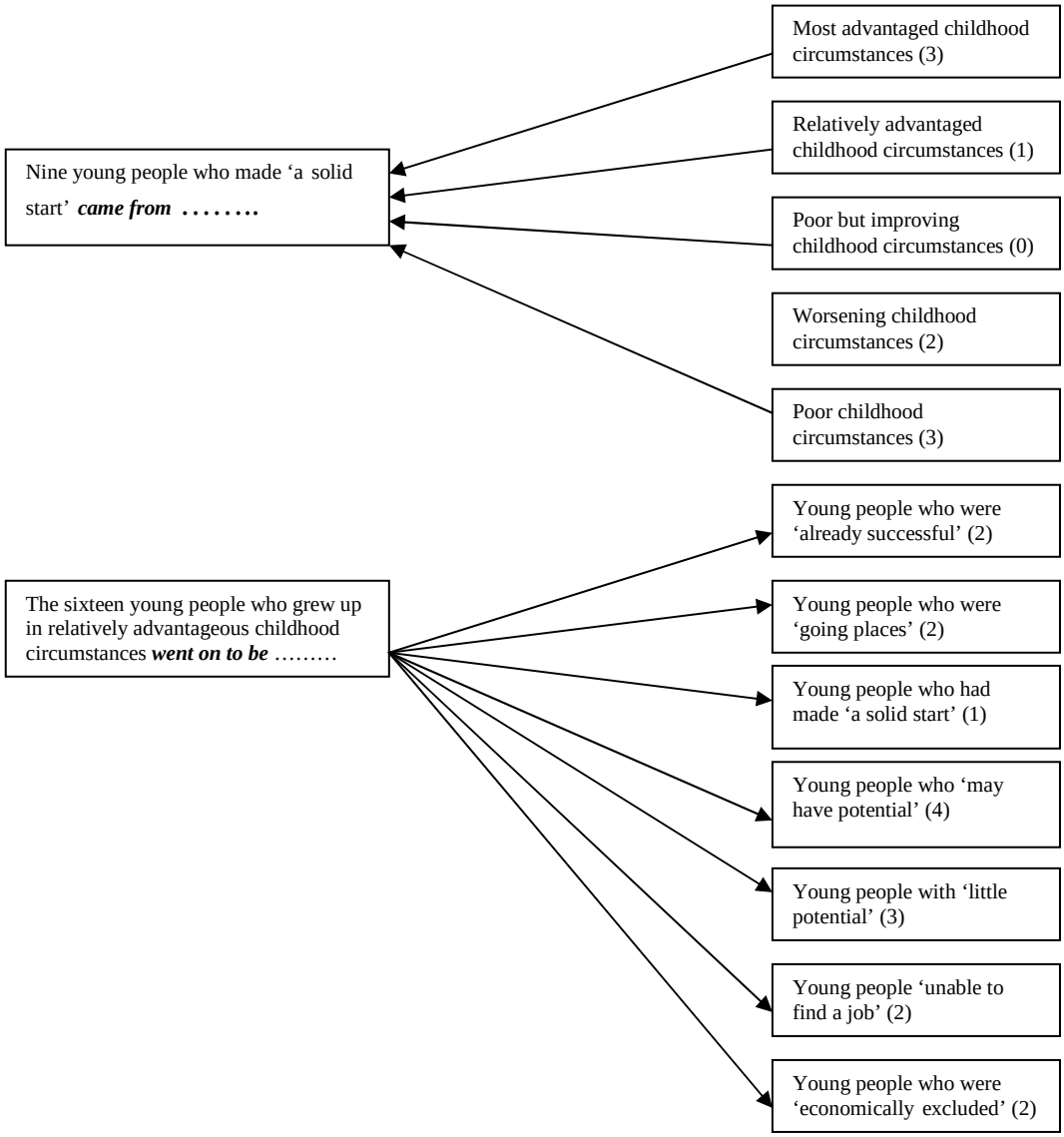
These narratives drew discursively on gendered social norms about parent-child relations but also showed the scope for agency and the renegotiation of parent-child relations in old age. The stories are valuable for what they tell us about older people's current state of mind and the extent to which they feel that they have had a 'life well lived' (Rowe and Kahn, 1998) rather than as a factual record of what actually happened across chronological time. The articulation of self-justification or self-blame within the narratives, which may indeed 'distort' facts, provide rich insight into motivations, desires, regrets and moral evaluations of older people trying to make sense of their lives.

In the research on Zambian youth, we did attempt to 'unravel' the material 'facts' and key events in their (much shorter) lives enabled us to compare individual accounts against one another and to ask why certain events or circumstances, such as coming from a poor rural family or a rich middle class one, were problematic or advantageous for some and not for others. Our data combined respondents self-assessments of this issue (their contemporary retrospective accounts of these relations) with more structured (but nevertheless retrospective and subjective) data on material and chronological events and achievements. In this case we intuitively employed a method of analysis that is in some key respects parallel to Wengraf's (2008) 'twin-track analysis'. Wengraf proposes that material from biographic narrative interviews be analysed using a twin-track. Whilst one track focuses on the subjective memory of the life, 'the told story', the other attempts a 'future blind analysis'. This latter method involves the researcher in reconstructing a chronological event series for individual life histories and using a panel of volunteers to examine discrete 'chunks' of individual lives (in the order in which they actually occurred) to discuss alternative and likely next steps in ignorance of the respondents subsequent life course. The researcher can then use the 'future blind analysis' to throw light upon 'the told story'.

We did not adopt this strategy, but did look comparatively at where children who had achieved certain levels of success had come from (by looking *backwards* in time through their retrospective accounts), as well as using the data to reconstruct their trajectories as they unfolded over 'real' time (by looking *forwards* through the lives of children who started in similar 'places' and seeing where they ended up) (see figure 1). This comparative analysis is qualitative[16], focusing on the different trajectories of young people and their accounts of how and why events unfolded as they did. In this way the 'biographical inevitability illusion' (ibid) and self-justificatory problems associated with self-accounts can be challenged to some degree.

[16] The sample for this work is not statistically representative. Rather young people have been purposively selected to identify a range of experiences of economic (dis)empowerment across both the formal and informal sectors.

Figure 1: Analysing trajectories 'backwards' and 'forwards'



The insights that arose form this process were significant in trying to make sense of the economic mobility of young people, particularly how some individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds were able to make progress towards 'economic empowerment' whilst others from more advantaged backgrounds seemed unable to capitalise on this. For example:

> "Ten *young Zambians* identified their childhood homes as 'chronically poor', 'poor' or 'moving in and out of poverty'. Despite these difficult circumstances, three have been able to make a 'solid start' towards economic success….The three who managed to make a 'solid start' all had fathers who had completed tertiary education and had good jobs but faced poor childhood circumstances as a result of the death of a parent in early childhood. Phileas went to live with his maternal grandparents when his mother died; he had no contact or any financial support from his father, a diplomat. Christina's mother, Naaliah's aunt and uncle and Phileas's grandmother all faced hardship when they had to finance the education of these children placed in their care. Only one, Christina, progressed beyond secondary school to an accounting qualification largely thanks to an older brother who 'picked her up' when he saw her determination." (Locke et al 2008:31-32)

The trajectories of many youths were often marked by a number of false starts and 'uncompleted transitions' (Calves et al 2009:125), such as starting education late, or starting a small business that fails, or dropping out of a vocational qualification, and by 'chance' events. Whilst 'self-perceived chance events' [were]….a "tool" with which many people come to understand their lives" (Shanahan and Porfeli 2007:117), these often represented pay-offs from social and kinship networks in which young people invest opportunistically and from which returns are highly uncertain. Indeed, it was the quality of family and social networks were very significant determinants of whether youth were able to move forwards. The ongoing importance of interdependency of young people's lives with parents, siblings, spouses, children and other relatives beyond their initial childhood circumstances was very striking. For example:

> The initially good economic position of her 'relatively advantaged' early childhood did not last for Rose ('economically excluded'). Rose's bad relationship with her abusive father worsened when she became pregnant at the age of 13. Under violent pressure from her father to get an abortion she did not want, she married out of desperation. Despite having three children with her husband and against his wishes, she worked to earn money to take herself back to school and managed to complete her secondary education against the odds. However her marriage collapsed and Rose took her children to stay with her mother. Rose wanted to do a three-year course in journalism. When her illiterate father heard she was doing well he decided to sponsor her, but only paid for one month, bringing back the shameful pregnancy as a motive for stopping his support. Rose, now 23 years old, lives entirely alone, supported only by the grudging charity of her brother and her cousin. (précised from Locke et al 2008)

These two methods avoid taking 'self-theory' at face value and give greater methodological rigour to the interpretation of subjective accounts. Whilst free-flowing narratives give rich depth for probing the social construction by individuals of their relationships with different children, they do not offer enough systematic material detail to really enable a 'twin-track' analysis. Whilst the more directed methodology of the semi-structured interviews enabled a twin-track analysis, this structure itself constrained the extent to which respondent's themselves identified significant way markers and significant relationships. Our interest in their progression through education and into work framed the narratives, privileging the completion of certain stages of education over other possible way markers. Similarly, young people's constructions of relations with parents, siblings, other relatives and friends were articulated in their narratives in terms of the role they played their specific choices and pathways through education and into work rather than in other ways that might have been (more) meaningful to them.

Locating individuals and the lives to which they are linked in the wider context

The influence of social and historical factors on networks of shared relationships is a crucial dynamic for the exploration of 'linked lives' (Elder 2002:202). The interest in how disadvantage is linked both within and across the generations was central to both pieces of research and requires an attempt not only to trace mentions of wider factors in individual accounts but also to situate the interpretation of individual accounts within a robust analysis of 'the changing times' (Elder 2002: 210) and indeed changing places that they inhabited. This is particularly critical for constructing an interpretation that speaks to development policy-makers and academics who are interested in a social institutional analysis that points to wider factors that are significant for the 'many'[17]: their interest is in what they can learn from individual lives about the process of development. Here we reflect on some of the key challenges and insights arising from our different ways of approaching this in the two pieces of research.

[17] And whose tolerance for 'idiosyncratic' stories, however interesting, is decidedly limited.

Our appreciation of the importance of context, meant that the research on older people was sited in Buenos Aires precisely because of Peter's long first-hand knowledge of Argentina and of excluded neighbourhoods within this city[18]. Selected secondary data and expert knowledge of Argentine social, economic and political history was integral to interpretation but rather than having to design gathering this information into our research, we were able to draw on Peter's prior knowledge as the research unfolded. Whilst context was considered no less important for the Zambia research, our strategy and comparative advantage in this respect was more challenging. The World Bank's desire to constructively influence ongoing policy efforts in Zambia around economic empowerment (Verschoor 2007) was a key motivation in commissioning this research and our combined methodological experience placed us in a good position to take on an analysis of young people's pathways to economic (dis)empowerment. However, none of the primary investigators were established experts on Zambia although the team did include local and non-local field researchers with considerable knowledge and experience of Zambia. Key informant interviews, which were integral to the research design for other reasons too, and the gathering of secondary data thus were crucial in this case for being able to make sense of the individual narratives. This strategy was to some extent imprecise in that we had largely to decide a priori what we needed to know about the history and current situation in Zambia and we were less placed to efficiently identify what we wanted to know and where we could find it. Moreover, our investment in gathering contextual information was a supplementary activity rather than the main research focus and thus bounded by money and time. Despite these reservations, our investment in an imperfect understanding of the changing times in Zambia proved to be vital, and we hope 'good enough'.

For the ageing research, the history of the socially-excluded neighbourhood was critical: the experience of recent development here had failed to improve the security of the neighbourhood despite social investment and also created space within which a recent surge in evangelical practice could thrive. Beyond this the mobility of individual respondents and their children presented a challenge. Most inhabitants were migrants from different parts of Argentina and did not share a clear local cultural identity. An understanding of historical dynamics and geographically defined development in places of origin was important for understanding respondents' views of their current lives in the neighbourhood. The dual importance of changing places in which respondents lived and ongoing changes in the place of settlement confirms the complexity of 'life-space mobility' (Dureau et al 2009: 139). For instance:

> Carlos… was born in one of the poorest provinces of Argentina, Tucuma´n, where the economy was dominated by sugar-cane monoculture. He had worked in the cane fields from the age of 14 years, but when many of the sugar mills closed in the mid-1960s, he decided to migrate the 700 miles to Buenos Aires. Carlos struggled to find stable work and had to move house several times, but he was acutely aware of the even more impoverished conditions in Tucuma´n. He explained: "I'm glad I came here because of all the poverty in Tucuma´n. It breaks your heart to see how the people live there. The people back in my village have to work on a daily rate cutting down scrub … and they don't get hardly anything for it. All over the province, people have to work like that just for food." (Locke and Lloyd-Sherlock 2008: 1192)

Movements of children in and beyond the neighbourhood also proved important in understanding linked lives and a key finding was that successful children tended to live

[18] Our first choice had been to work in a specific locality where Peter had done extensive fieldwork but this proved too unsafe to be a realistic proposition. Bajo Flores was a good second choice: Peter had some familiarity with this neighbourhood and our gatekeeper lived there making it a second best selection.

outside the neighbourhood and to maintain only remote contacts with parents whilst the far greater numbers of struggling or problem children remained within (never escaped) the neighbourhood. Roberto's experience illustrates the ambiguity of remote relations with 'successful' children who have moved away:

> About a year before our research, Roberto [64 years] tracked down his only daughter. He had had lost contact with her when she was only a few months old because his marriage failed and the then migrated to Buenos Aires. She was now married with six children and living in a middle-class neighbourhood of Buenos Aires. Since then he had visited her every week, and described their re-acquaintance as a near-miraculous, life-changing event. Roberto's life may have been 'transformed', but he said that he received little material support from his daughter… …[living] in a tumbledown shack and… …visiting soup kitchens. He said that his daughter did not visit him in Bajo Flores, because he did not want her to see how he lived. Later in the interview, Roberto admitted that he sometimes felt depressed, useless and alone, despite having found his daughter… Given his daughter's relative success, his 'shameful' circumstances and the guilt of abandoning the parental role, Roberto regarded her limited and one-sided engagement with him as excusable and, to some extent, what he wished." (Lloyd-Sherlock and Locke 2008: 1186-7)

Roberto's experience contrasts with that of most informants relations with the greater number of 'struggling' or 'problem' children who still live nearby, in Bajo Flores or even with the respondent:

> Despite the apparently numerous offspring[19], only one informant saw herself as heavily reliant on younger relatives for economic support. In the great majority of cases, the informants claimed no reliance or indicated that one of more of their children were economically dependent on them…. women were more likely to see themselves as on balance net care-givers rather than care-receivers – they said that they provided support for spouses, grandchildren and, in several cases, seriously disabled children…. In some cases, older people with children in the neighbourhood were forced to rely on charity and begging. Several expressed deep bitterness at the lack of support they received. According to one older woman, 'I worked while I had the strength to. I gave them [children] everything. Now I've lost my strength and can't do anything, they've just vanished into thin air '. Her words point to the felt injustice of her situation; she affirmed that she has been a good mother and did not deserve to be abandoned in old age. The number of struggling or 'problem' children was much greater than the number regarded as successful. In many cases, this had substantial impacts on the informants' lives. The concern that a child or grandchild might 'go off the rails', or that a problem child would behave 'destructively' (harming either themselves or the informant) was a prevalent source of unhappiness and vulnerability among the older people in the neighbourhood. Living in such a neighbourhood may contribute to problematic relationships, and receiving scant support from children reduces an older person's opportunities to live elsewhere. (précised from Lloyd-Sherlock and Locke 2008)

For our sample, then, children represented a substantial source of vulnerability rather than security for older people and this appears to be linked to the contexts in which they have lived and how latterly Bajo Flores has changed around them.

The ageing research was designed to probe the way that lifetime relations with children and wellbeing in later life were gendered. Gardner points out in her investigation of ageing amongst Bengali's in Tower Hamlet's that gender differences in narration should not be interpreted simply as the 'silencing' of women by patriarchal culture but are revealing of 'how they think about themselves and how they wish to be seen" and that this is in part due to

[19] Of the 22 respondents, 17 had at least 3 surviving children and many had large numbers of grandchildren.

the way in which "structural and ideological relations" shape the histories that women (and men) tell (Gardner 2002:62-63). In our instance, it was men who in general were less talkative but their individual stories reveal that gendered stereotypes that older women keep in contact with many children, while older men have tenuous links to few children and the implications often drawn, that children matter more to women in later life, could not be sustained.

> "Whilst the informants' narratives made discursive use of social norms about gendered parent-child relations, these norms do not capture the complexity of actual relationships and the possibilities for renegotiating the meaning of these relationships over time. Older men were somewhat more likely to have lost contact with children earlier in their lives. In most cases this was perceived as involuntary, either as a result of separation or migration, rather than as a result of selfish or irresponsible behaviour, and the informants expressed deep regrets. Several female informants also felt, however, that they had suffered from loss of contact with a child as a result of disintegrating relationships and migrations to Buenos Aires, and some expressed strong regrets about this. Furthermore, loss of contact or distant relations with children early in life did not preclude re-establishing or improving relations with children and grandchildren in later life, nor sadly the converse – relations with children could also become more distant or problematic in later life for both men and women… Rather than discount the importance of gendered identities in later life, these stories demonstrate their complex effects.…Gender matters, but not in the simplified and predictable way that is commonly assumed." (Lloyd-Sherlock and Locke 2008: 1197)

In this way, our engagement with context not only revealed how broader social and institutional factors play out in individual lives, but crucially allowed us to question key assumptions underpinning ageing and development policy. Much policy thinking in this arena erroneously assumes that children are a source of support for older people (UNDP 2002) and that whilst women are often able to capitalise on a lifetime of investment in children, those without surviving children and older men are especially vulnerable (UNDP 2005, Beales 2000). This logic underpins thinking in ageing policy around cash-transfer programmes (Lloyd-Sherlock 2008) and informs much quantitative work (Palloni 2001) where the near-ness and particularly co-residence with children can be uncritically regarded as a positive for older people. The findings also argue against accepting the inevitable bias against research in socially-excluded contexts, since experience here was so very different from what is commonly assumed, as well as suggesting that the importance of comparative research in 'socially-included' neighbourhoods, where closer scrutiny of parent-child relations may reveal previously concealed ambiguities.

The Zambian youth work also made use of secondary data to anchor particular life histories and linked lives within the turbulent economic and political changes that have affected today's youth so severely. For example, our data confirmed that the education of young Zambians is lower than that of their fathers[20] (see also Chinguta 2001) and that many of respondent's personal trajectories, particularly with respect to accessing tertiary education, can be directly linked to the impact of education sector restructuring from 1991. However, as Isiah ('going places') told us "secondary school is still a luxury in Zambia" (Locke et al 2009:78). But in addition, considerable attention was also paid within the semi-structured interviews to going beyond informants views about their own success (or lack of it and the reasons for this) to explore their normative views on the wider context for youth economic empowerment in Zambia and how they compared their achievements (or lack of them) with others of their age.

[20] Of our non-representative sample 69% (41/60) young Zambians completed secondary school or higher whilst reporting that 78% (37/47 for which we have this information) of their fathers completed secondary school. Further whilst 49% (23/47for which we have this information) of fathers have some sort of post-secondary education, only 33% (20/60) of our sample of young Zambians do.

> The ten young Zambians who 'may have potential' felt that ultimately self-employment was preferable to self-employment, notably because of the freedom the self-employed have to take action, and to avoid exposure to bad treatment, financial or otherwise. Iris, who has her own salon, and Lucy, employed in the informal sector as a tailor, both say that when you are employed you have to "hand over the money that you make to your employer". Overall informal employment was the least preferable form of employment as "working for an individual" was seen as objectionable, combined with long hours and poor pay, thus making it hard to simultaneously pay or study for further qualifications or to save the start up capital needed to set up on their own. Whilst employment in the formal sector offered better financial security, few considered it a realistic opportunity particularly given their dissatisfaction with own their educational achievements and lack of the right social contacts. Many in this group often have long range strategies involving incremental improvements in their working situations. For example, Jones is hoping for a driver's job and is active in that direction; this will enable him to learn some skills in mechanics, which he thinks offers a good foundation for future progress: "I will be looking for other things, so when I have that chance I can have my own thing". As Simon notes "it is not just a matter of an opportunity coming your way, but it is also about how you utilize that opportunity as well". Many in this group see success in terms of the distance separating them from being successful. Iris sees successful people as those who come from rich families, and Everlasting puts it this way: "Ah like people who have money, it is very rare to find them helping people who have nothing and are in need, even when you have good business plans and you go to them and say oh I want this, it will take years for that person to help you." (précised from Locke et al 2008)

In this way their aspirations for the future reflect bitter experiences in the past but what is perhaps most striking is their long range strategies to incrementally carve out improvements in their economic circumstances in what they perceive to be a very hostile environment. Nevertheless, their combined perspectives and personal experiences offer important insights into the distribution of opportunities for economic advancement in Zambia. People 'like them' with missed educational backgrounds and nobody to 'carry them' forwards to a job or business need to work hard over the long term all the while making small ongoing investments of various sorts in being able to improve their situations against the odds of better-connected, better-financed, and nakedly-exploitative competition.

Together with the purposive sampling that was stratified across the labour market, their perceptions of the wider context of their life trajectories enabled a strong analysis of how Zambian youth ascribe their successes and failures to personal factors or changing social structural conditions. A wide range of policy relevant conclusions emerged from the study that pointed not only to improvements in expanding access to further education and to employment opportunities but which raised substantial concerns (about the frequency of adverse events and over-reliance on strained social networks) that pointed to the need for mitigating public interventions. In contrast to widespread anxiety about moral decay amongst an idle/unemployed youth, the life histories revealed astonishing perseverance in the face of adversity. In addition, the results questioned a number of prevalent assumptions pertinent to the field of youth transitions to economic empowerment. The young Zambians here viewed economic empowerment not in narrow terms of 'having a job' but more broadly in terms of having the security of resources to be able to fulfil family obligations build and look after one's immediate and extended family. The relationship between educational attainment, work experience, work aspiration and income was considerably more complex than anticipated illustrating the difficulties of 'reading off' a young person's prospects from their education or understanding their wellbeing from their positioning within the labour market. Finally the ambiguity of family relationships was emphasised by the fact that "many young people experienced the pressures from their families to take on financial responsibilities, together with the claims of dependents (living with them or apart) as a considerable burden, so that "somehow instead of going forwards, you are going backwards." (Locke et al 2008:xi). The interdependence of their lives was both the motivation for economic empowerment, a helping hand in that direction and a constraint on their achievements.

Conclusions

Specific methodological choices in thematically focused and more directed approaches to life course analysis create particular challenges and opportunities for analysis and interpretation. We have considered the challenges and opportunities arising in two contrasting pieces of research in relation to three central themes: making sense of different narratives; engaging critically with the subjectivity of narratives; and effectively contextualising individual lives in wider development processes. We have argued for argued for greater methodological scrutiny of the kind of 'heterodox' life history work that is increasingly being taken up within development studies for theoretical and policy research. Whilst the more narrative-interpretive methodology is widely accepted within qualitative research its validity is widely discounted by more quantitatively orientated researchers and 'research users'. On the other hand, the more 'mixed' methodology of the semi-structured life histories can speak more effectively to the non-initiated but is more divergent from the established methodological requirements of doing subjective life history work. One aspect of building a stronger case for the usefulness of narrative methodology needs to involve greater methodological reflection. Here there is a need to avoid the tendency towards pragmatism that can be found in policy-orientated work within development studies and which is sometimes used to obscure methodological reflection.

Reflection on methodology is, of course, a core part of the reflexivity that is central to any qualitative inquiry, not just life course analysis, and most particularly it is integral to any claims it may make to rigour. Claims to rigour are closely bound up with the epistemological roots of life course methodology but this does not mean that there is only one place to sit (Cole and Knowles 2001). Indeed, whilst the ageing research was overtly constructivist, in the sense that it did not attempt to establish or reconstruct historically factual accounts, the youth empowerment research might be described as being critical realist, in the sense that it does seek to anchor accounts to specific objective facts but that it also acknowledges that the social construction of lived experience. These epistemological imperatives are played out in the respective design, interpretive strategies and representation of findings in each case creating the sort of 'internal consistency' required for 'good' life history research (ibid:125). This points to the equal value of 'mindful-ness' in the use of heterodox as well as narrative-interpretive applications of life course methodologies.

Antoine and Lelievre argue convincingly for the value of qualitative life course analysis to compliment more quantitative approaches (2009). We would like to suggest that another shift away from 'methodological fundamentalism' (Levy and the Pavie Team 2005:23) to address the methodological concerns of life-focused approaches. Life-focused approaches have important pay offs in reaching development studies and development policy audiences and they will be strengthened by greater methodological debate. Life course methodology enabled these pieces of research to explore subjective reflections on experience over time in ways that were revealing of the significance of linked lives to individual strategies, aspirations, and evaluations within shifting contexts and circumstances. These ways of making sense of ageing lives and young lives offer unparalleled insights into the 'life-worlds' *and* 'life-times' of those concerned allowing us to understand dynamics and process of social institutional change across time *and* what it means for those concerned.

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