Lifetime relations with children and wellbeing in old age. Qualitative research in a socially excluded neighbourhood of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Abstract

It has been widely presumed in developing country settings that contact with children is beneficial to older people's wellbeing, and in particular that older women benefit from children's support more than older men because of their lifelong commitment to family responsibilities. This study questions the validity of these stylised notions through its analysis of 22 life histories of older women and men in a socially-excluded setting in Buenos Aires. The study focuses on older people's subjective accounts of their lifetime relations with children and grandchildren, and examines the role of these relationships in their current wellbeing. The life histories illustrate the complexity of their lived experiences and the significance they attribute to key turning points. Informants speak of the anxiety and harm caused by struggling children, about problems of remote relations with successful children, and the insecurity of their neighbourhood. Our analysis contrasts a materialistic approach to analysing the influence of children on older people's wellbeing with a more holistic view of the way older people see these family relationships in their accounts of their current wellbeing. By applying a lifecourse analysis to these narratives, we demonstrate that the links between specific parent-child relationships and current wellbeing are located in wider lifetime experiences. We conclude that children may represent a key vulnerability for older people, that the gendering of parent-child relations and later life wellbeing is varied and nuanced, and that local social exclusion and wider national economic decline play into the way relationships unfold with specific children, with implications for the intergenerational transmission of wellbeing.

Introduction.

It is widely accepted that wellbeing in later life is highly relational, perhaps more than at other ages, and that relationships with offspring are particularly significant. There is a tendency, particularly in developing countries, to portray these relationships in somewhat stylised terms. These include an assumption that, *ceteris paribus*, higher levels of contact with offspring (including co-residence) will lead to higher levels of material security and general wellbeing in later life (United Nations Population Division, 2005). There is a tendency to assume asymmetric dependency both in the material and affective domains, whereby older people are almost always "net beneficiaries" (United Nations Population Fund, 2002). A third common assumption is that older women are more likely than older men to receive support from offspring due to their lifelong commitment to family responsibilities (Beales, 2000).

The evidence base for these assumptions is not however robust, and the settings in which these relationships operate are highly, diverse, complex and dynamic. This paper seeks to explore older people's perceptions of their relationships with their children and other offspring in a single, socially excluded neighbourhood. It considers informants' understandings of the effects of these relationships on their current wellbeing both in narrow, material terms, as well as more holistically. To this end, we draw on insights from gender studies which highlight the importance of relational aspects of wellbeing (Jackson, 1997), and explore the way that informants make sense of their relations with specific children. This chimes with an increasingly holistic and subjective approach to wellbeing in mainstream development studies (Gough et. al., 2006) and contrasts sharply with many studies which remain heavily focussed on

income poverty (Lloyd-Sherlock, 2006a). It also enables us to move away from over-generalised understandings of links between gender, 'family capital' and wellbeing in later life, to engage with more situated analyses of how meanings about family relationships are constructed.

As well as distinguishing between "narrow, material" and "open, subjective" approaches to wellbeing, the paper seeks to locate current experiences within a wider life course framework. Rather than treating later life as a discrete life stage, it is framed as part of a process of lifelong transition. More specifically, we explore the extent to which the forms and meanings of relationships with offspring and subjective understandings of wellbeing are mediated by experiences throughout life. In doing so, we make use of the notion of "successful ageing" (Rowe and Kahn, 1998), which takes into account quality of life and interpretations of past experience (a life "well-lived"). By combining life course perspectives with different approaches to wellbeing, the paper offers an account of inter-generational relationships as experienced by socially-excluded older people. This brings to light several findings that directly challenge established assumptions about later life in developing countries.

Relational Wellbeing, Family Capital and a Gendered Lifecourse

Most research on older people's lives in developing countries focuses on a narrow range of material concerns and obvious policy issues, such as income security, access to pensions and, less emphatically, health status (Barrientos, Gorman and Heslop, 2003; Lloyd-Sherlock, 2004). In countries where pension systems are poorly-developed, family and particularly children have been widely understood as a vital form of social insurance for old age (United Nations Population Fund, 2002). Where

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pension provision is more widespread, research has focussed on the extent to which benefits are pooled across households and whether they crowd out or bolster other forms of support (Lloyd-Sherlock, 2006b). Consequently, most research on older people's living arrangements and contact with off-spring has been primarily concerned with flows of material and instrumental support (Palloni and Peláez, 2002; Gomes da Conceição and Montes de Oca Zavala, 2003; Aboderin, 2003). Notwithstanding the ambivalent findings, the idea has persisted that links with children, in particular co-residence, are closely linked to material wellbeing in later life. A recent survey of Latin America and the Caribbean reported that, '….co-residence significantly increases the probability of receiving support…the number of living children positively affects the chances of older persons receiving financial assistance' (United Nations Population Division 2005: 104).

It is recognised that material exchange between the generations often flows in both directions, and that not all children contribute to the wellbeing of their older parents (Schröder-Butterfill, 2004; Lloyd-Sherlock, 1997; Hoff, 2007). Despite this, there is still an implicit assumption that children represent a potential form of material wellbeing in later life, which may be lost due to childlessness, AIDS-related mortality, migration or other factors. The possibility that children may be a source of material vulnerability and ill-being in later life does not seem to have been considered. The conceptual frameworks informing some of this research can be critiqued for their over generalisation about family relations across extremely diverse and dynamic settings, for their reductionist representation of children as an investment or asset on which older people can hopefully rely, and their focus on individualised and material understandings of wellbeing in old age. Although they draw support

from social norms about children's obligations to ageing parents in a range of contexts, it is rarely acknowledged that such norms are culturally specific and change in response to wider economic, social and political developments. Moreover, it should not be assumed that these social norms coincide with social practice. Notions of relational wellbeing engage closely with how access to material wellbeing is mediated by specific social relations. These relations unfold over time and are contingent on a range of factors. A relational approach to wellbeing is also valuable because it reveals how subjective wellbeing is bound up with gendered concerns about children and other close relatives and friends. In other words, these social relations matter not just as conduits of material support, but also because they have intrinsic emotional value and are a significant source of wellbeing in their own right.

Whilst life course approaches to older people's wellbeing have recognised many of these dynamics, a rather stylised view has emerged, which contrasts older women's tendency to benefit from their earlier reproductive endeavours to older men's isolation and diluted "family capital" -a result of their conflictive or disinterested relations with children earlier in life (Gomes da Conceição and Montes de Oca Zavala, 2003; Aboderin, 2003). These polarised representations conflate social stereotypes and norms with wider social practice and neglect the negotiability of family relations as the various members age. Social constructions of parent-child relations feed into this process, but the subjective agency of parents and children means that they are not trapped by these normative frameworks. Indeed, other insights from life course perspectives on ageing have usefully drawn attention to the way old age involves renegotiating parent-child relations, as well as a desire to make sense of one's life that

can lead to closer relations with children in later years (Schröder-Butterfill, 2004; Varley and Blasco, 2003).

Research design and setting.

The evidence for this study mainly comes from 22 in-depth life history interviews conducted in 2006 with older people living in a single neighbourhood of Buenos Aires city, Argentina.[i] These were supplemented by key informant interviews with local community figures. We took an exploratory approach that enabled informants to define their current wellbeing in their own terms and to focus on past life experiences which they deemed particularly significant. Nevertheless, the study was guided by the premise that wellbeing in later life is highly relational, and that both the form and meanings of these relations are strongly mediated by experiences through the life course.

The selection of research setting reflected several considerations. There have been complex socio-economic changes in Argentina during the lives of its older residents. In their childhood and youth, the country's level of prosperity was comparable to many 'developed' countries, with large flows of migrants from relatively poor northern provinces to booming industrial centres such as Buenos Aires (Lewis, 2002). This period also saw the establishment of a relatively embracing welfare state, including near-universal education and healthcare, as well as pensions for formal sector workers. From the mid-70s, the country experienced increasing economic instability and decline, the virtual collapse of its urban industrial sector and rising levels of poverty and unemployment. Thus, opportunities have shifted through the lives of informants, and between them and younger generations.

These processes of change have had complex effects on families and inter-generational relationships. By the 1990s, the great majority of households in Argentina were nuclear, rather than extended, and 37 per cent contained at least one person aged 60 or more years (Sunkel, 2006). It is widely claimed that social change and economic instability have put families under growing strain, to the particular detriment of women's wellbeing. Over recent decades divorce, female headship and children born outside of marriage have all risen, along with a growing tendency for adult children to remain living with their older parents (Jelín, 2005; Sunkel, 2006). Clear indications of shifting norms and attitudes are however less evident. On the one hand, studies from various parts of Latin America point to the resilience of the inter-generational obligations that are embedded in Roman Catholic teaching (Varley and Blasco 2003; Melhuus 1996). On the other hand, some studies suggest that there has been a weakening of traditional models of authority based on age, as more youth-centred and individualistic sets of values have taken hold (Jeliín 2005). Interestingly, anthropological research conducted in impoverished urban and rural districts of Mexico back in the 1960s referred to similar normative shifts (Lewis 1951; Lewis 1969).

The research was conducted in a single neighbourhood of Buenos Aires, Bajo Flores. Although not intended to represent wider conditions in Argentina or even Buenos Aires, the district's history is closely linked to the wider national experience. The neighbourhood was first established as a shanty town in the 1940s by northern migrants who moved to the city for employment. Since the 1970s it has faced deepening social problems, and today Bajo Flores is notorious across Buenos Aires

for high levels of crime, drug dealing and street violence.[ii] Partly in response to these problems, the neighbourhood attracted various social investments. Most of the original shanties have been replaced by state-financed housing, and the infrastructure has been upgraded, including schools and health centres. Over the past five years, the residents of Bajo Flores have been targeted by an array of assistance programmes, which offer both food and cash (Villatoro 2005). These have reduced income poverty in the neighbourhood, but have had little if any effect on long-term unemployment and drug abuse. The problems faced by Bajo Flores may not be exceptional in Latin America. In many parts of the region, similar anti-poverty programmes have made considerable progress in reducing urban poverty, while unemployment and drug-related violence have increased (ECLAC, 2006; Moser et. al., 2003). A growing number of older people live in such neighbourhoods, yet they remain largely ignored by academics and policy researchers, partly because of the intrinsic difficulties of working in dangerous environments.

None of the informants were born in Bajo Flores and a defining aspect of social exclusion in this neighbourhood is the absence of strong community relations and a lack of shared and locally-specific social norms governing intergenerational relationships. Nevertheless a broader reference point can be found in the cultural norms about gender and family relations in Latin America as a whole. Varley and Blasco (2003) in their examination of older women's lives in Mexico point to the social idiom that 'you reap what you sow' and the way in which this is embedded within Catholic doctrine. They highlight the social norm that family ties are 'naturally' strong and the ways in which they are gendered such that older mothers are considered to be the 'archetypal recipients of family charity'. These social norms infer

filial obligations of love and support, especially on the part of sons, to ageing parents, and particularly mothers, and suggest that older women who lack care or support have done something to deserve it. Throughout Latin America, motherhood is seen as the epitome of womanhood and "to be a poor mother is to be a poor woman" (Melhuus 1996:244).

Our analysis focused on the impact of parent-child relationships on wellbeing in later life *as experienced by the informants*. The absence of the perspectives of interviewees' children, spouses, or indeed other close relatives or friends, means that these narratives offer a partial picture of informants' wellbeing. Furthermore, life histories involve informants 'storifying' their lives, so that they make sense for researchers and this performance can to varying degrees exhibit self justification, or self blame, as well as a tendency to order random events (Riessman 1994). Our interpretation of the data is not concerned with constructing reliable factual accounts, but is orientated towards generating a rich sense of the subjective wellbeing of older people with particular reference to their understanding of their relationships with children. As such, the narratives reveal how older people use understandings of family relationships discursively to make sense of their unfolding relations with children and their current wellbeing.

Gender ideologies influence the production of individual life history narratives in complex ways. They permeate the way in which individuals perceive, articulate and make sense of their lives, as well as influencing the course of their lives directly in more material ways. For instance, some male informants tended to be less prepared to discuss their life experiences, other than work history, in more than a basic,

superficial way. Normative ideas about masculinities and femininities shape what can be thought, what can be said, and how, as well as informing the way individuals evaluate their lifetime experiences. The contradictions between finding a way of talking about or making sense of injustices or disappointments experienced in life and the constraints or expectations of gendered normative frameworks mean that silences or ambiguities in accounts can represent important data.

The complexity of the narratives meant that it was necessary for us to strike a balance between capturing the richness of individual narratives and teasing out a more general, systematic picture from the data set as a whole. Informants' life trajectories were diverse and usually complex: some informants had many children and grandchildren, creating problems for the analysis of multiple relationships over time. Most informants' lives involved considerable instability such as complex migratory trajectories, movements within the city, changes in household structure, marital instability and uncertain livelihoods, creating challenges for identifying key turning points from frequent radical changes of circumstance. Rather than being concerned to resolve these complexities or obtain complete information about the changing structures of kinship networks over time, we focused instead on commonalities and differences in how informants referred to particular relationships, turning points or changes in circumstance as significant in determining the course of their own lives. These complexities add to the richness of the case studies, demonstrate the inappropriateness of simple life cycle or life stage frameworks for simplifying informants' experiences, and call into question orthodox conceptualisations of inter-generational relationships and well-being in later life.

Wellbeing and relations with children and grandchildren

Existing studies from Latin America on older people's wellbeing and their family relations make two main points. Firstly, it is observed that older people, particularly women, are increasingly likely to live alone, and that this is associated with disadvantage and vulnerability (United Nations Population Division, 2005). This trend is driven by a complex set of factors, including the early onset of fertility transition (hence reducing the supply of surviving children), geographical mobility and changing attitudes to co-residence. On the other hand, it is also widely claimed that older people with pensions tend to share these benefits with younger relatives, and that this has boosted inter-generational exchange and co-residence (Bertranou and Grushka, 2002).

The data in Table 1 suggest that the informants in this study, especially the women, might expect to receive substantial support through family networks.[iii] Of the 22 informants, 17 reported having at least three surviving children. Only one informant had no (great)grandchildren, and in many cases the numbers of grandchildren were strikingly high. Since most informants had become grandparents by their early 40s, many of these grandchildren were now adults. Grandparenting was not therefore necessarily associated with ageing, and there was considerable potential for grandparent-grandchildren links to be significant for later life wellbeing. While seven reported that they lived alone, most of these had several offspring living in Bajo Flores.

Despite the apparently "good supply" of offspring, only one of the informants saw themselves as heavily reliant on younger relatives for economic support. In the great majority of cases, informants claimed no reliance or indicated that children were economically dependent on them. The extent to which they relied on younger relatives for instrumental help was less clear, with most keen to affirm their independence. However, there was strong evidence that female informants were more likely to see themselves as net care-givers than care-receivers, reporting that they were providing support for spouses, grandchildren and, in several cases, seriously disabled children. Taking a material approach to wellbeing, it would appear that family networks and inter-generational exchange were relatively unimportant.[iv] This is surprising since less than half informants received pensions and many were living in very difficult circumstances.[v] 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 injustice of her situation by affirming that she has been a good mother who by implication did not deserve to be abandoned in old age.

The in-depth life histories in this study provide an opportunity to go beyond these material approaches to wellbeing with richer understandings and interpretations, which serve to both complement and explain the limited pattern of material exchange. This section continues with two case studies, which illustrate the multi-faceted nature

of these relationships. Each informant's account contains significant unique features, and so it is not possible to choose a single case which is broadly typical of wider experiences. Nevertheless, Eulogia and Roberto's testimonies give a sense of the range of gendered experiences and the different issues which need to be considered. The section concludes by making some more general observations about inter-generational relationships and the way that informants constructed ideas about specific children in making sense of their lives.

Eulogia has six daughters, 24 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren. She maintains contact with all of them, and they come together every year to celebrate her birthday. 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" – working as a seamstress for 25 years "without getting up from the machine"- to these daughters' easy lives. She emphasises that none of these four daughters does anything for her, but instead "have the cheek" to come to her for money. According to Eulogia, these daughters have become over-reliant on welfare handouts and are incompetent at managing their husbands' money. She is especially bitter that none of these daughters made any effort to help with her husband's funeral costs. She goes on to complain (somewhat contradictorily) that one of these daughters was 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 talks about her other two daughters very differently. One of these has her own family, while the other (the youngest) is unmarried and still lives with her. The youngest daughter had been studying at university when Eulogia's husband fell

terminally ill, six years ago. According to Eulogia, her daughter dropped out of university to care for him, and they both became severely depressed when he died. This prevented her daughter from returning to her studies. She now helps Eulogia make and sell meat pasties at a local market, which is their main form of livelihood. Eulogia is very compassionate about this daughter, portraying her as sensitive, unworldly and good-hearted. She expresses concern that her daughter will be unable to cope with life when she becomes too old to look out for her. She claims her daughter has no desire to marry, having seen her sisters' largely unhappy marriages. Following her husband's death, Eulogia and her younger daughter both converted to evangelical Christianity, and this eventually helped them both to overcome their grief.

Eulogia views her final daughter as more independent than her youngest one, but more positively than the other four. This daughter occasionally helps with making the pasties, and shares her evangelical faith. Eulogia arranged for this daughter to look after her youngest one when she travelled away from Buenos Aires for three months. She claims that the main purpose of this trip was to help her younger daughter get used to coping on her own.

Eulogia's moral evaluation of her children was central to her account. Her construction of four daughters as problematic clearly associates their neglect of filial obligations with their irresponsibility as mothers and wives. However, the link between the degree of support she obtained from her different daughters and her judgement of them was not straightforward. For Eulogia, key issues were whether her children shared her religious faith, whether she felt their ethic of struggle and hard work compared favourably to her own, and the extent to which she felt they could rely

on each other at difficult times. Her husband's death had been an element in this, either affirming or remoulding her attitudes to each daughter. Whilst there is a tradition of youngest daughters staying at home to care for ageing parents, Eulogia, who appears energetic, entrepreneurial and independent, emphasised her youngest daughter's vulnerability and dependence on her.

Roberto provides a very different narrative. He only had one daughter, resulting from a short-lived marriage more than forty years ago, which collapsed when his daughter was only a few months old. He then migrated to Buenos Aires and lost all contact with his daughter. Roberto claims that he never remarried because he had never come to terms with the loss of his original family. The previous year, when he made a visit back to his place of birth, he was able to track down his daughter's telephone number. She was 40 years old, married with six children and living in a middle class neighbourhood of Buenos Aires. He now visits her on a weekly basis, and describes their reacquaintance as a near-miraculous, life changing event:

> "My life changed when I found my daughter. I'm a totally different person now. Before I didn't have dealings with anyone, didn't talk to anyone, just stayed inside my room, not talking to anyone. But when I found her it all changed, as if all the guilt had been lifted away because I hadn't gone looking for her when her mother had taken her off".

Roberto's life may have been "transformed", but he says that he receives little material support from his daughter, even though he is in a very bad economic position. Following a serious accident two years ago he has been unable to work, but has yet to receive a pension. He lives in a tumbledown shack and survives by visiting

soup kitchens along with a small lump sum he was paid after the accident. He says that his daughter does not come to visit him in Bajo Flores, because he does not want her to see how he lives. Later in the interview, Roberto admits that he still sometimes feels depressed, useless and alone, despite having found his daughter. Roberto constructs his daughter's limited and one-sided engagement with him as excusable and desirable because of her relative success, his shameful circumstances and his guilt at abandoning his parental role.

These two contrasting accounts demonstrate the difficulty of systematically analysing relationships between the informants and their children. Whilst Euologia and Roberto superficially conform to the stereotype of older woman in contact with many children and older man with tenuous links to few children, their individual situations are considerably more complex than the stereotype would allow. From both, it is apparent that although material exchange may be limited, each informant's wider sense of wellbeing was strongly influenced by they ways they perceived their children and their relations with them. A key aspect of this, is how informants judged their own children's moral worth and how they evaluated their own past and present roles as parents. Drawing on all the interviews, it is possible to identify some very broad and somewhat crude categorisations of how children were perceived.

Several informants referred with pride to children they perceived to have been very successful in life. Some of these children had obtained university degrees and all had either obtained high-status jobs or married someone with such a job. In almost every case, these children had moved away from Bajo Flores to better parts of the city. As in the case of Robertos's daughter, these children provided little direct support and

rarely came to see them. It was understood that the neighbourhood was too dangerous to visit, that these children led busy lives and had to put the needs of their own children first. Informants compared their own inferior origins, limited education and, as they saw them, humble achievements to these children's, and some of the interviews suggested that they felt they had little to offer them. It is possible that informants were inclined to portray most children who had moved away as "successful" since it was difficult for those living in the neighbourhood gainsay this, and to justify the relative lack of contact they had with them.

Another category of children can be loosely referred to as "strugglers". Informants emphasised the difficult lives led by these children, with problems mainly related to economic stress, particularly finding stable jobs, and to marital crises. The amount of sympathy these children received was very variable, as apparent in Eulogia's testimony. As a broad generalisation, these children appeared to be more a source of concern and/or bitterness than a source of support or contentment for informants.

The final category overlaps to some extent with the previous one, consisting of children who were perceived as deeply problematic in some way and who represented a significant burden or source of unhappiness to informants. They included children that informants felt had "gone off the rails" or "strayed from the right path in life".[vi] This typically involved drug addiction, violence and imprisonment, and in several cases these children had directly harmed informants' material wellbeing by assaulting them, stealing from them and, in one case, attempting to appropriate their house. A separate set of children suffered significant disabilities, or mental or physical health problems, which left them highly dependent on the informants.

The numbers of children portrayed by informants as either struggling or "problem children" was much greater than the numbers who fitted most closely into the successful category. In many cases, this had substantial impacts on informants' lives. One informant lived with a seriously disabled daughter and a violent, mentally unstable grandson. Another child had died in prison in violent circumstances. In a different case, an informant had been robbed by her drug addict daughter two days before the interview, and had been obliged to raise several of this daughter's children herself. Another informant lived with a mentally disabled son with learning difficulties, and had lost a second son as a result of political violence.

Given the large numbers of struggling and problem children, concerns about the welfare of children emerged as a major theme in almost all the interviews. These concerns were often associated with major past or present crises, and exerted a large influence on informants' sense of wellbeing. Almost every case had at least one child who had gone through a serious life crisis, which had impacted directly or indirectly on the informant's wellbeing. Past crises, particularly those involving the death of a child, continued to be a cause of sadness and depression. The risk that a child or grandchild might "go off the rails" or that a problem child would behave in a "destructive" way (either towards themselves or the older person) was experienced as a major form of vulnerability for older people living in this neighbourhood. While it has something in common with the issue of old age abuse, this aspect of later life vulnerability has not been identified in other studies (Schröder-Butterfill and Marianti, 2006). This may partly be due to a lack of research in violent, socially

excluded settings. It may also reflect the widespread assumption that children represent a potential resource in later life, rather than a more nuanced view.

It is likely that this pattern of relationships is particular to Bajo Flores. This may be because living in such a neighbourhood contributes to problematic relationships and also because having problematic relationships and receiving scant support from children reduces informants' opportunities to live elsewhere. Nevertheless, it would be dangerous to assume that older people living in other low income neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires or other Latin American cities are entirely immune to these forms of vulnerability.

Life course and wellbeing.

So far, the paper has demonstrated the value of going beyond material approaches to wellbeing and inter-generational exchange. It has also shown the difficulty of identifying direct, generalisable links between current contact with offspring and wellbeing in later life. It is already evident from Euologia and Roberto's stories that key events in the past influence the meaning and value of current relations with children: in Euologia's case she saw events surrounding her husband's death as particularly telling of her various daughters' filial commitment and in Roberto's case his actions to re-establish relations with his daughter were 'transformatory'. However, we have so far made no attempt to look at how particular turning points are constructed by older people as crucial for their relations with particular children and their perceived wellbeing over time, nor have we examined the interplay between

wider events and personal biography. This section explicitly attempts to do this by applying a life course framework .

As applied to sociology, life course theory has made a number of important contributions which are helpful for analysing these diverse narratives (Elder Jr., 1998; Heinz and Krüger, 2001). Among other things, these postulate that: (i) that individuals construct their own life courses through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances; (ii) lives are lived interdependently (linked lives), with historical and social influences expressed through networks of shared relationships; (iii) the developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events depends on when they occur in a person's life (timing), and (iv) individual life courses are embedded in the historical times and places they experience over their lifetimes. The concept of 'successful ageing' (Rowe and Kahn, 1998) or 'a life well-lived' engages particularly well with our concerns about how respondents' interpretations of past experiences and relationships with particular children influence perceptions of current wellbeing and relations with children. As with the previous section, we shall illustrate the application of a lifecourse framework through two different case studies before making some more general observations.

Daniela (68) and her husband (72) live alone in a small, poorly-maintained two-room house built by the government on the edge of the shanty town. They share her husband's pension (£55 a month), which leaves their per capita income below the official poverty line (£45). Daniela has started the process of claiming a pension of her own, although the prospects of success remain unclear. She has had four children,

three of whom are still alive. They receive no material support from their surviving children, and have no other forms of income or livelihood. While Daniela's material standard of living is not good, she assesses the relational elements of her wellbeing quite positively. She feels that she and her husband get along with each other well, and are happy living without their children. Daniela places a lot of emphasis on her active life-style and large numbers of friends and social networks, which centre on her religious beliefs – Daniela is a convert to evangelical Christianity and an active church member. She gets particular pleasure from her 21 grandchildren and 8 great-grandchildren, with whom she has a lot of contact.

Carlos (79) was seriously injured in a work accident several years ago and now receives the basic pension. The household lives off this pension, along with his son-in-law's earnings as a bus driver and food parcels that they get from an assistance programme. Carlos does not get on very well with his wife (67) and other family members, is concerned and frustrated by his health problems, has few friends in Bajo Flores and is unable to get about as much as he used to. Nevertheless Carlos says that:

> "When I go to bed, I look at my house and I give thanks to God. I still find it hard to believe that I am living like this, in this place…Apart from that, I feel happy because I have such great daughters. They came out so lovely, thanks to God. And the lad was more than that, [sighs] that's something that [tails off]. It almost did me in. He was so lovely."

Within similarly constrained circumstances, Daniela and Carlos have constructed very different lives for themselves. Their subjective perceptions of their wellbeing are clearly influenced by non-material considerations around intimate relations,

friendships, and spiritual beliefs. Whilst religious belief represented a source of comfort for Carlos, for Daniela it also provides an active social life, supplementing her family contacts, and as we shall see transformed the way she experienced past crises. In each case they single out particular experiences in their past lives that they feel have been important in determining the course of their lives: for Daniela these are the circumstances surrounding her childhood and her later conversion; for Carlos they are migrating to Buenos Aires and his son's death.

According to Daniela, her early childhood experiences and particularly her mother's behaviour were key shapers of her material life course. Soon after she was born in Buenos Aires her father died and her mother placed her in the care of relatively affluent godparents whilst she went out to work. Daniela was very happy with this arrangement, but her godmother died when she was 12 and her mother insisted she return to live with her. Daniela says:

> "I wanted to stay put, because there were children of my own age in the same house. Their mother had been like a second mum to me and asked me to stay….but my mother said 'Pah!' she gave me a good slap and took me off crying, so fast that we didn't stay for my godmother's funeral. I never found out where they buried her."

Daniela's mother's marriage swiftly collapsed, their economic situation deteriorated and by the time she was 16 they were living in a shanty town. A few months after arriving there, Daniela married a local man and quickly had her first child. Daniela feels that she and her husband have remained trapped in a situation of chronic poverty

ever since and she contrasts her actual life with the way it might have been without her mother's problems or had her godmother lived.

Given Daniela's narrative, her assessment that she is 'having a good life' is striking. This positive outlook is firmly rooted in her evangelical beliefs, which she evidently valued for the resilience it provides her in the face of difficult circumstances:

> "It's very beautiful. I feel so well now. I feel accompanied, never alone. It gives me vitality which I need to keep going in life. I tell everyone I can that they have to go [to the Evangelical church] now because there are so many bad things happening in the world".

Daniela's conversion to evangelical Christianity took place in 1986 when she was 49. Her youngest son, Rubén, had been "abandoned" by his wife, who took their two young children with her. Daniela was devastated by this, becoming depressed and furious with daughter-in-law:

> "I felt really bad. It even started to give me heart problems and high blood pressure…Then I went to an [Evangelical] church…and they all started praying. I saw this great light. It was like I was coming to life again.… something bad escaped from deep inside me – I'd really wanted to murder that woman."

Daniela describes this experience as giving her the inner strength to cope with the crisis. After a few years, her son remarried. By that time, Daniela felt she had overcome his loss and that her prayer had played an important part in his recovery. It is particularly telling that when another child, Luís, later died following a long history of illness and alcohol abuse, Daniela felt more able to cope this crisis than the earlier divorce. As well as her conversion, her contrasting moral evaluations of Luís as a

"problem child" and Carlos as a "deserving struggler" may explain her different responses.

Like Daniela and many other informants, Carlos had an unstable and difficult early life. He was born in one of the poorest provinces of Argentina, Tucumán which was dominated by sugar cane monoculture. He had been working in the cane fields from the age of 14, but when many of the sugar mills closed in the mid-1960s, he decided to migrate around 700 miles to Buenos Aires. Carlos struggled to find stable work and was forced to move house various times, but he was acutely aware of the gap in material living standards he could enjoy there compared to conditions back in Tucuman:

> "I'm glad I came here because of all the poverty back in Tucumán. 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."

Carlos' subjective wellbeing was not influenced by a single transformatory event like Daniela's conversion, but was profoundly shaped by his only son's death and subsequent connected events. Carlos recalls:

> "I cried a lot about my son, for a whole week. And after three months I'd gone down from 68 kilos to 60, then 57. I walked the streets talking to myself. I would see some young men and think they were my son....You can loose a mother, father, brother, but your own son –that's tough."

Carlos was finally able to bring himself out of his depression when he discovered that his son had left behind a child he had previously not known about:

> "But his girlfriend didn't want the child to come to our house or to know us. Then one day my daughter's boyfriend came…I didn't want to go out, I didn't want to listen to the football, to do anything… and he said 'Carlos a woman and a child are looking for you'….The girl's grandmother had escaped, that is she'd stolen the child away and brought it here so we could know it. The kid didn't know anything about us.

> I came down to the door. And there was this lady with a kid who said 'Hello, granddad'. I didn't do anything, I was so surprised, and I was stuck in the doorframe, like I was glued to it..…[Later] I picked him up in my arms, just to have him for a moment. It really was my own son in my arms."

Carlos's grandson was eight at this time. Since then Carlos has maintained contact with him, but the boy did not match Carlos's expectations:

> "I wanted to take him under my wing to make sure he studied. I told him 'If you end up with your father's memory, you'll be a marvel'…. But he didn't want to study…he quit after eight years. It's a couple of weeks since I've seen him."

Carlos continues to feel the death of his only son keenly, and this has tempered his sense of his life improving since leaving Tucumán. He enjoys having contact with his remaining daughters, is proud of the 'way they have turned out', and with his grandchildren. As with his son's boy, his understanding of his relationship with the grandchildren is sometimes parental:

> "We had my granddaughter with us for a while when she was very little....It was almost like she was my [tails off]. I had her for almost a year. She was brought up by me."

Despite their very different lives, Daniela's and Carlos' subjective wellbeing could not be understood simply through reference to current circumstances, but had to be located in their wider life experiences. Their agency in constrained circumstances is demonstrated by Daniela's conversion in response to Ruben's divorce and by Carlos' attempt to parent his son's son and his granddaughter. The interdependence of their lives with those of their children reveals itself to be complex and ambiguous, a source of vulnerability as well as satisfaction, varied in intensity and importance over time. Daniela and Carlos's experiences question the common assumption that older women's lives are more 'linked' to those of their children than older men's lives. In fact, religion had transformed the way Daniela experienced her relations with her children and their lives, giving her substantial resilience in the face of a child's death and enabling her to supplement, and perhaps to some extent substitute, social relationships with children with those formed through the church. Carlos' primary source of pain (intense grief from the death of his son) and pleasure (how his daughters 'turned out') is rooted in his relationships with his children, and he uses the idiom of parenting to express his love for his grandchildren.

The timing of specific life events is critical to their impact as evidenced by the different effect that the loss of a son had on Daniela and Carlos. Luis' death was not such a severe blow to Daniela as Ruben's divorce in part because it occurred after her conversion. Carlos' son's death was a bitter blow in part because he was the only son,

and may have been influenced by the fact that his death occurred when his wife's childbearing was complete. The embeddedness of individual lives in historical times and places is manifest in the fact that Daniela's and Carlos' choices and experiences are shaped by broader historical events. Evangelism was making inroads into neighbourhoods like Bajo Flores and actively seeking converts at the time when Ruben was divorced (Semán, 2000). The collapse of Tucumán's sugar industry and availability of employment for rural migrants in Buenos Aires influenced Carlos' decision to migrate.

Given the unique ways these experiences play out, it is not possible to systematically capture them for the entire set of interviews. In other narratives, the division between material and non-material aspects of wellbeing was not always as evident. However, there are many ways in which the wider accounts resonate with Daniela and Carlos's stories, and they all demonstrate the value of examining different facets of wellbeing from a life course perspective.

The link Daniela makes between her own childhood experiences and later life wellbeing is seen in many other testimonies. The majority of informants referred to difficult childhoods, including unstable relationships and frequent cases of violence and serious abuse. Many claimed to have been denied access to education and forced to work. For several informants, this had a large impact on their wellbeing in later life, occurring in several ways. For some it had led to a sequence of vulnerability, such as a life of low status jobs or early marriage as a means of escape. Many informants still felt angry, traumatised and depressed about what had happened to them. In more than one case, this included serious diagnosed mental health problems. More generally,

these experiences did much to shape informants' attitudes towards their own children, emphasising their efforts to ensure that their children had a better start in life. This in turn influenced their wider relationships with these children.

A second set of common experiences relates to migrating to Buenos Aires. Echoing Roberto's testimony, several informants claimed this decision was prompted by a family crisis, often a failed marriage. Among the informants were several women who took the decision to leave young children behind with other relatives for a number of years. While justifying their decision, they claimed that this had often led to bitterness on the part of the children, which had affected their subsequent relationships. According to one informant:

> "They didn't understand why I'd gone. It wasn't because I didn't love them. It was because my husband treated me so badly. If I'd have stayed there I'd have been dead. My patience just snapped….I left them with their father, so that he could learn what it really meant to have children, and so he could see how much they missed their mother… Ever since then, the children have been so bitter, they never understood."

This informant's words carefully refer to social norms against unreasonable treatment of wives by husbands to justify her abandonment of her children and to construct her claim that she has been unfairly treated by her children, who see her as a poor mother.

Several other informants, like Daniela and Eulogia, had converted to evangelical Christianity, often citing crises related to children or husbands. Flora's is a fairly

typical case. She was converted by her son, who had himself been converted after a life of "vice, drugs and drink". Immediately following his conversion, Flora saw her son become hard-working and responsible, for which she thanked God. When she fell seriously ill and was hospitalised, her son and other converts came to pray for her. She suggested that this contributed to her recovery. Again, this narrative demonstrates the inter-play of specific life course events and inter-generational relationships. In many cases, as with Daniela, this conversion framed informants' general sense of wellbeing, enabling them to come to terms with material hardships and disappointments about children. According to Sandra:

"I know that I have to do without a lot of things; that I haven't been able to do a lot of things I'd dreamed about doing –like improving myself, staying in work, buying stuff for the kids, a computer. But I still have this strong faith, so I keep on hoping and trusting."

The various Evangelical churches have spread rapidly among poorer groups across Latin America, (Martin, 1990). Their particular success in attracting converts in Bajo Flores was in part a reflection of the setting of social exclusion and insecurity, in which other community networks were poorly developed, and where many older people could not rely on their off-spring for material or affective support.

While all the narratives contain significant examples of the interplay between discrete life course events, wellbeing and relationships with offspring, a key life course effect for all informants was that of continued instability and insecurity. Since early childhood, this had affected most aspects of their lives: relationships, employment,

living conditions and engagement with the authorities. For example, many informants had been forced to make frequent moves within Buenos Aires, particularly when a large part of Bajo Flores was demolished by a military government in 1976. As such, most informants' uncertain and insecure lives and relationships were largely a continuation of past experience. This may also explain the attractiveness of the "certainties" of Evangelical beliefs and social networks.

Conclusions.

"They fuck you up, your mum and dad.

They may not mean to, but they do."[vii]

Larkin's famous poem reflects the accepted wisdom that children are deeply vulnerable to their parents' actions and attitudes. This paper shows that parents are equally vulnerable to their children's. How parents deal with the resultant problems and crises can have a large effect on their subsequent wellbeing and how they positively they evaluate their own lives –a key aspect of "successful ageing". By drawing attention to these broader aspects of wellbeing, the paper offers a very different perspective on older people's lives to that usually given by research in developing countries. This tends to focus on a narrow range of material concerns such as income, access to pensions and, less emphatically, health status. While not denying the importance of such issues, this study gives older people the voice to evaluate their own wellbeing and identify aspects which they felt to be most significant. Life histories, though not without their problems, are shown to be an effective tool for obtaining these insights.

The paper demonstrates that, to be able to make sense of the current wellbeing of groups such as older people, this must be located within their general life course experiences. Histories of relationships with children and other close family members are usually a central part of these experiences. However, these relationships are unpredictable, and can be as much a source of crisis and vulnerability, as a source of support and fulfilment. Contrary to the expectation that "successful children" are the key to material security in old age, for many informants having such children was deeply ambiguous. They provided little material support and their relations were often distant, even though informants viewed their achievements with pride. Relationships with children are influenced by external factors, such as a local setting of social exclusion and a national context of economic decline. Insights from life course theory are helpful for understanding these complex webs of temporal and geographical effects.

The paper focuses on relational elements of wellbeing, and these of course are highly gendered as is evident in the narratives. Whilst the narratives make discursive use of social norms about gendered parent-child relations, these norms do not capture the complexity of real relationships. Indeed, a key finding is the danger of making any generalisation about past behaviour and present wellbeing. To some extent it is true that men faced particular risks of losing contact with children earlier in life. In many cases this was, perceived as being against their wills, either as a result of separation (as with Roberto and Rubén) or migration, rather than as a result of selfish or irresponsible behaviour. In several cases female informants also suffered loss of contact with children as a result of migrating to Buenos Aires, and some expressed strong regrets about this. Nor do current patterns of relations with children always fit

with the stylised version. Daniela's testimony indicates that, while her children remained important to her, she was less emotionally dependent on them than Carlos was. Rather than discount the importance of gendered identities in later life, these stories demonstrate their complex effects. For example, Carlos' struggle to cope also reflected his frustration at no longer being able to work, a concern which was sometimes voiced by female informants but was not as strongly tied into their self esteem.

The informants' accounts draw attention to the dangers of idealising family relations as a support for older people in socially excluded settings. While the wellbeing of older people is strongly influenced by these relations, they tend to be unpredictable, and norms of inter-generational obligations are complex. This calls into question the stylised views of household dynamics which increasingly underpin social policies in developing countries (Sunkel 2006). Instead of relying on assumptions of household altruism, social policy interventions must be grounded in empirical research in specific settings, which may give a rather different picture. Many aspects of the narratives resonate closely with the concepts of marginality and culture of poverty, influential in the 1950s and 60s, but subsequently attacked and eschewed for providing an overly-negative, passive and judgemental view of the poor (Lewis 1969; Perlman 1976). Rather than viewing marginality as a culture produced by the poor, characterised by fatalism and irresponsibility, our account stresses the agency of older people coping with problematic social relations associated with socially excluded settings. The paper has also demonstrated how neighbourhood and community relations are equally significant for older people, and that interventions at this level must go beyond material provision to address more complex social issues. Dealing

with local problems of drug abuse and unemployment might do much to reduce older people's vulnerability to more children 'going off the rails', the general fears they expressed about living in such a dangerous neighbourhood, and the reluctance of more 'successful' children to maintain strong contact with them.

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Table 1. Living arrangements and reported off-spring.

Name*	Age	Household size	Total reported living children	Total reported grandchildren and great-grandchildren
Monica	69	4	10	17
Lena	58	7	8	At least 8
Clara	65	3	7	At least 17
Silvia	75	1	7	"Too many to count"
Eulogia	73	2	6	34
Ernesta	76	2	6	32
Magdalena	69	8	6	At least 14
Ana	80	5	5	At least 11
Flora	76	1	5	16
Leticia	70	2	3	19
Sandra	57	3	3	
Patricia	68	2	3	5
Paula	60	1	3	At least 4
Daniela	68	2	3	29
Susana	78	7	3	23 (4 great-great grandchildren)
Antonio	73	5	3	At least 8
Carlos	79	5	3	5
Carolina	76	1	2	2
Helena	73	2	1	4
Alfredo	62	1	1	4
Roberto	64	1	1	6
Miguel	76	1	0	0

*These are not the original names.

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[i] Interviewees were chosen opportunistically, through a gatekeeper who lived in the neighbourhood. They included 17 women and 5 men. Rather than specify a chronological age, the gatekeeper was asked to seek out individuals who considered themselves "older people". Their actual ages ranged from 57 to 80, with 20 aged over 60. Most interviews were conducted in the gatekeeper's own house and usually entailed a single meeting. Fieldwork took place in summer 2006.

[ii] See Prignano (1991) for information on the historical origins of the Bajo Flores.

[iii] It should be borne in mind that the data do not represent objective records or representative information, and should be seen as part of wider, subjective narratives. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe the lower numbers of children reported by men. This may be the result of sampling bias. It may also be a reflection of some men's weaker lifetime contacts with offspring and a reluctance to accept paternity.

[iv] This broadly corresponds with Lloyd-Sherlock's earlier findings from research on inter-generational exchange in three different shanty towns in Buenos Aires (Lloyd-Sherlock, 1997).

[v] Relatively low levels of pension coverage occur due to the large number of non-Argentines and because many informants were too young to obtain non-contributory benefits (usually available from age 70).

[vi] The term most widely used was "salir del camino" (stray from the path). This metaphor was in keeping with the strong Christian beliefs expressed by most informants.

[vii] From "This be the verse" by Phillip Larkin (Larkin, 1990).