

Critical moments?

Capturing meaning and significance in
qualitative longitudinal data

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Overview

- Working with narratives – form and content
- Cross sectional analyses: Critical moments as a unit of analysis and comparison
- Cumulative analyses: from critical moments to family dialogs
- Gaining a perspective on choice and fate: revisiting ‘critical moments’

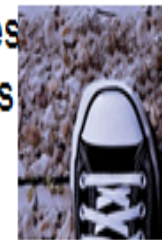
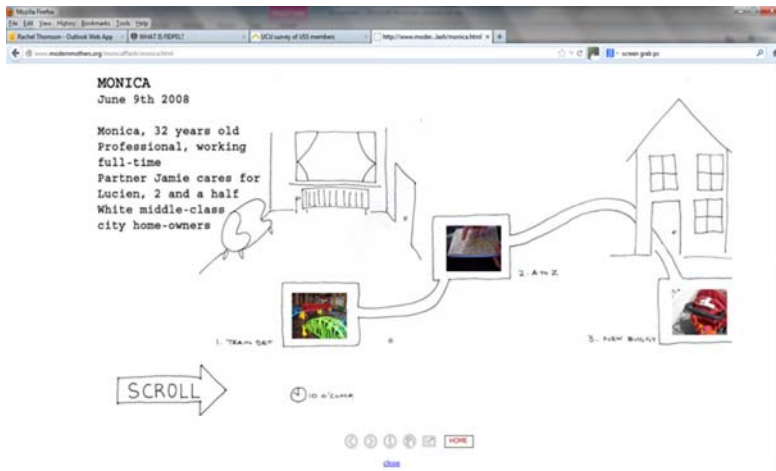
Resources



- * 60 first time mothers
- * 12 family case studies
 - 6 longitudinal
 - 'Day in a life'

Inventing Adulthood

- 100 young people x 10 yrs x 5 places
- Diverse, situated, unfolding
- Structure and constraint, resources and resourcefulness



Form and Content

- Life lived and life told
- Narrative analysis vs analysis of narratives
- Turning points
- Events
- Alain Badiou has argued that the meaning of an 'event' can only be accessed retroactively. Between the external 'event' (which he characterises as an ontological rupture without symbolic meaning) and an internally constituted 'destiny' there must be something like 'subjective reciprocation' . Longitudinal methods provide a way of documenting how individuals and groups encounter and respond to new circumstances. The salience of events which appear to be historically and/or biographically significant, can be revisited over time, with successive accounts revealing how meaning is reworked and recast in new contexts (Kehily and Thomson 2011)

Cross sectional approaches

- Inventing Adulthoods
 - Reflexive project of self
 - Fateful moments: risk assessment, reworking of narratives
 - Operationalised as 'critical moments' (ours and theirs)
 - Comparison through form
- times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands at a crossroads in their existence or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences. (Giddens 1991: 113)

Step 1: mapping critical moments

Biographical moments

- **family related situations:** being kicked out of home, parents splitting up, parental unemployment;
- **illness and bereavement:** a parent's death, suicide, death of a baby, diagnosis of chronic illness;
- **moving** (house, school, town, country);
- **education** events: both formal (exams, changing schools) and informal (bullying, relationship with teachers);
- **'trouble':** creating young people as problematic (teenage pregnancy, drug taking, illegal activities);
- **leisure and consumption:** learning to drive, clubbing;
- **rites of passage:** 'coming out' as lesbian, gay; discovering (or rediscovering) religion; and
- **relationships:** friendships, couple relationships, sexual experiences.

Structuring processes

Choice _____ **Fate**

Leisure/consumption

Death/Illness, family events

Fateful moments (agency)

Fatalistic (absence of agency)

Affluence

Poverty

Step 2: Biographical case studies

Moments of educational and social exclusion

Biographical parity

Focus on relationship between resources and resourcefulness

- Lorna: party, exclusion from friendship group and changed educational pathway
- Robin: getting busted and getting back on track
- Hamad: getting busted and going bad

‘ while we are unable to resolve the methodological riddle between a life that is lived and a life that is told, our longitudinal research design will enable us to comment on the medium term impact of critical moments on real-world transitions as well as the reworking of these experiences into subsequent narratives of self’ 351

Thomson, R. (et al.) Critical Moments: Choice, Chance and Opportunity in Young People's Narratives of Transition *Sociology* May 2002 vol. 36 no. 2 335-354

The challenge of cumulative accounts

- Managing the data: the case profile as a tool for condensing data and showing continuity and change. A conceptual key into the data set.
- Changing perspectives from which stories are told. Emergence of dischordant accounts. Proliferation of critical moments.

Gaining a perspective on choice and chance

- How our initial reading was shaped by theory (focus of fatefulness)

- ‘ Our interpretation with the benefit of hindsight indicated that Robin’s critical moment at the age of 16 may have fulfilled the criteria of being ‘fateful’ in Giddens’ terms but seems not to have been a turning point in his ‘life as lived’. Rather it forms part of what became a pattern of confession, self-inspection and experimentation in his ‘life as told’ . [..]
- Giddens’ model of the fateful moment does not provide an explanation of *why* particular identities are possible and endure, whilst others are not. To explain the trajectories of the young people in our study we have needed to explore the wider framework within which certain identities are liveable (Butler 2004), including the structures of opportunity within which they operate, and limitations on their options and choice (Furlong and Cartmel 1997, Nilsen and Brannen 2002, Thomson et al. 2004).

Critical moments revisited

- the accumulation of biographical accounts helps us to see the consequences of events, but reveals the significance of antecedents and the wider biographical context linked lives
- ‘In our original analysis of Lorna’s critical moment we were aware of the significance of her father’s intervention. Yet in retrospect we can see this event in new light. He had done very well with little education, and would clearly support any route that Lorna chose to take. Lorna’s solidarity with her parents could be one source of her ambivalent feelings of belonging and valuing of employment over education’.
- ‘the value of longitudinal data for exposing the biographical significance of that which is not explicitly stated or narrated but which nevertheless emerges over time. It is an example of how the meta-analytic narrative is also contingent and iterative, with new stories being told from the same material with the benefit of a shifting present. It also illustrates some of the ways in which hindsight and a retrospective analytic perspective takes over from the prospective orientation as a data set matures.

Lessons learned

- Formal rhetorical devices can provide a mechanism for comparison and a means through which to connect the social and the biographical
- Limits of applying a theoretical model such as Giddens' fateful moment to empirical material, a limitation that is amplified with the accumulation of multiple accounts over time
- The critical moment as a marker of provisional identity claims
- With the accumulation of accounts we capture contradiction, dissonance and repetition. Silences are more discernable, and consequences and antecedents begin to be revealed.

The conceptual tool of the fateful moment proved to be a double-edged sword for our own work. On one hand it provided a link to the wider theoretical construct of the 'reflexive project of self' and to generative debates about the neoliberal subject in the remaking of privilege and inequality. But it also closed the conceptual space between the story told and the life as lived, encouraging us to accept professions of agency at face value. Our attempts at operationalizing the fateful moment stalled in the face of complex and contradictory data and we struggled to fit unfolding case studies within its exacting yet descriptive criteria. From where we write today, as custodians of a rich data set of longitudinal biographical accounts, we are intrigued by the possibility of rethinking the critical moments we find in narratives as **clues** and **rehearsals**, sometimes realised and sometimes not, which are suggestive of a plethora of 'unlived lives' which may have fallen away yet which still haunt the imagination and may yet find expression (Bertaux- Wiame 1997, Portelli 1990). Working with a mature longitudinal data set has led us towards the rich methodological and theoretical resource of oral/life history and biographical sociology. This is a retrospective analytic project, distinct from, yet complementary to the prospective project that we began with at the outset of the study.

Holland, J. and Thomson, R. (2009) 'Gaining a perspective on choice and fate: revisiting critical moments' *European Societies* 11 (3): 451-469.

References & Resources

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