Qualitative life-grids: a proposed method for comparative European educational research

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Qualitative life-grids: a proposed method for comparative European educational research

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Abstract

Drawing upon our large three-year mixed-method study comparing four English university sociology departments (Economic and Social Research Council, grant number RES-062-23-1438) we demonstrate the benefits to be gained from concisely recording biographical stories on life-grids. We argue that life-grids have key benefits which are important for comparative European educational research. Some of these advantages are common to all biographical methods, for example, they facilitate: nuanced understandings of the impact of education policies in different national contexts; more complex depictions of cross-national and within-country variation and similarity; theoretical and conceptual developments based upon commonality and difference across national boundaries; and, insight into the relationship between the macro, meso and micro levels for case-based approaches. Life-grids also have the advantage being less-resource intensive than recorded and transcribed biographical interviews. They are an easier method for researchers to use and comparative checks for quality are simple and can be ongoing. The data generated is more conducive to comparison and designing the life-grid ensures cross-cultural understanding and dialogue between researchers is in-built. The physical act of co-producing life-grids with participants builds relationships and knowledge of participants' lives in ways that can be useful to other aspects of data collection.

Introduction

Whilst most comparative European research is statistical (Savage and Burrows, 2009) since the nineteen seventies biographical methods have also made important contributions to comparative approaches (Wright, 2011). Biographical methods have provided important insights into gender roles, social mobility, employment experiences, illness and work-life balance (Chamberlayne et al., 2000, Chamberlayne et al., 2004, Wengraf et al., 2002, Bertaux and Thompson, 1997). There is also a developing literature relating to biographical and narrative approaches to comparative educational research (Crossley, 2000) and this demonstrates how education and learning are shaped by longer and shorter term historical and cultural processes. It also provides instances of individual agency within different national contexts and suggests ways for affirmative action (Trahar, 2006). These subjective accounts are important if educational research and the policy recommendations arising from it are to be based on an understanding of people's lives (Rustin and Chamberlayne, 2002). For example, within the field of higher education it is important to investigate the consequences of the policies being developed to shape the European Higher Education Area from students' and academics' perspectives (Díaz-Méndez and Gummesson, 2012).

Case-based approaches which incorporate biographical methods are an increasingly popular method in comparative European research in general (Brannen and Nilsen, 2011) and to research into education in particular (for example, see the methodologies of the, Eurohesc projects http://www.esf.org/activities/eurocores/running-programmes/eurohesc/eurohesc-projects.html) . Case-based research focuses on phenomena in the context of purposefully sampled organizational or social contexts and explores the relationship between: a) international social, economic and policy processes and trends; b) specific national and

organizational examples; and, c) the range of personal experiences within these contexts (Brannen and Nilsen, 2011).

Incorporating an analysis of biographical data into case-based research projects allows for the possibility that individuals in the countries being studied may have similar experiences as well as their being differences. Therefore, biographical data can inform new boundary-crossing analytical categories, concepts and theories. For example, Brannen and Nilsen (2011) demonstrate how the lives of three mothers working in the public sector in different countries overlap and diverge in ways which might inform innovative conceptual and theoretical development.

Biographical interviews raise issues regarding resources for larger European research projects, particularly multi-method case-based approaches (full life-history interviews can take hours or days to complete, (Horsdal, 2011)). Researchers have adopted more focused interview styles, for example, by exploring only those aspects of life deemed relevant to the topic being studied, to address these problems (Brannen and Nilsen, 2011). However, these interviews still provide very dense narrative data. Our experience of using qualitative life-grids to collect and analyse biographical data in a UK-based study suggests that these might provide a useful methodological tool for case-based comparative European educational research.

The qualitative life-grids described here were developed for a large three-year mixed-method research project exploring the relationship between league table representations of the quality of learning and teaching in universities and inequality between students. The research is relevant for thinking through the use of life-grids in comparative European case-based educational research because it also interrogated the relationship between: 1) the macro (the national and international policy context); 2) the meso (the institutional context of the universities); and, 3) the micro (students' life-stories and their (in)capacities for agency). Life-grids enabled us to collect biographical data that was sufficiently rich for our purpose but more easily analysed and compared than recorded and transcribed biographical interviews.

In this paper the value of life-grids is illustrated by discussing the role and effectiveness of the method in our own project. We draw upon our experience to bring out some of the issues that may have to be addressed in adapting life-grids for use in comparative European research. The contribution that the life-grids have made to every stage of the study is discussed and the potential of the approach for producing theories and concepts which cross boundaries is demonstrated. In our project institutional boundaries were crossed but life-grids would be similarly useful in a cross-national context.

Learning from the pedagogic quality and inequality in university first degrees project.

The research design

The university sociology departments in our research are similar to cases in case-based research. We have called the universities in which they are located Community, Diversity, Prestige and Selective to represent their status. The departments at Community and Diversity have been regularly ranked in the lower third of the major UK league tables and those in Prestige and Selective have been frequently placed in the top third. A range of data has been generated to provide insight into students' experiences, departmental and institutional provision and the impact of national and international policy. Our analysed data sets include: 98 life-grids and interviews with first-year students; 31 case-studies; videos of teaching in each year in each university; students' assessed work from each year; 16 interviews with teachers; departmental and curricula documents; institutional documents;

national and international policy documents; and, a survey of 765 students. In a European case-based project there might be one or more institutional cases in each country as was the case with the CINHEKS project (http://www.uni-kassel.de/einrichtungen/en/incher/research/research-area-internationalisation-and-globalisation/cinheks.html) which explores the concepts associated with knowledge societies through a series of cross national institutionally based studies.

Developing an understanding of the similarities and differences in students' experiences and in the transformations they underwent was a central to this study because it helped us to explore the validity of league table representations of institutional difference. It is commonly assumed that students leave highly ranked universities better graduates but league table representations of the quality of universities overemphasise statistically insignificant institutional differences (Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012). League tables produce unjust hierarchical representations of universities which reflect the status and wealth of different institutions and of the students that attend them (Abbas et al., 2012). They focus on what is provided for students and ranking is dependent on universities resources, for example, the amount of money they spend per student (Ashwin et al., 2012). The few measures of teaching quality that are used, for example from the student survey, are flawed (Gibbs, 2010a, Gibbs, 2010b). Understanding whether universities are providing a good education requires insight into the process of student transformations and the role the university plays in this. Combining recorded interviews about students' university experience with the biographical data provided by the life-grids allowed us insight into this process.

Biographical data was also needed to interrogate some of the assumptions underpinning previous research into the role that class, gender and ethnicity play in disadvantaging students in university contexts (Archer et al., 2003, Crozier et al., 2008, Reay et al., 2009a, Reay et al., 2009b, David, 2009, Pasztor, 2010, Forsyth and Furlong, 2003). This literature, which is concerned with decreasing inequality, sometimes reinforces unjust university hierarchies' by accepting league table representations of quality as true. When authors' position students who successfully gain a place at lower-ranked universities as accessing an inferior education (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009) they reinforce rather than challenge the ideologies regarding institutional difference that produce injustice. In pilot studies we found that sociology teachers' from differently ranked sociology departments had similar aims and approaches to teaching (McLean and Abbas, 2009) and that sociology curricula in an extremely high and a low-ranked university covered comparable theories and methodologies (Abbas and McLean, 2007). We needed to know if unjust reputations, rather than unequal educational quality, were reinforcing social hierarchies and this involved the exploration of the relationships between the macro, meso and micro that the life-grids facilitated.

We sought to challenge conceptions of educational difference based upon universities as a unit of analysis and this is a similar aspiration to that of case-based comparative European research when it aspires to move beyond having the nation state as the fundamental point of comparison (Crossley, 2008)

The design of the qualitative life-grid
Designing a life-grid involves debate about what data is needed, how it will be organized and what will be compared at the end. Our life-grids were designed by drawing upon a small methodological literature on the topic and one of the author's experiences of using life-grids for data analysis and representation (Parry et al., 1999, Wilson et al., 2007, Webster et al., 2004). The grid was produced on an A3 sheet of paper and it was designed so that researchers and students could represent the students' key life events in writing and symbols (e.g. arrows between boxes. The life grid was structured by themes across the top of the grid

(education, family, housing, friends and significant others, leisure, parents employment, own employment and health) and time-spans down the side of the grid. Time-spans were based on the educational milestones of the English education system (pre-school, primary school, high school and post compulsory-education). Each square on the grid had to be filled in, even if it was just to record no significant change, for example, in housing.

In designing the grid efforts were made not to over-shape students' representations of their lives with pre-conceived theoretical questions (Scott, 1998). Whilst the themes did relate to what is known to shape educational experience (Hansen and Mastekaasa, 2006, Paechter, 1998) they were also based upon a desire to develop a broad understanding of students' lives.

Comparable data from each participant was important for us to gauge the influence of aspects of peoples' past experiences on their perceptions of their university experience, for example, we were able to identify the prevalence of positive educational experiences and being identified as able by teachers in the accounts of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who ended up at university.

More holistic and emotionally based representations of participants lives (e.g., as challenging, unproblematic, happy, complex, simple or difficult) were also important. This sense of students lives was based upon their claims about emotions and the events participants identified as key. For example, if most of the events were big and traumatic the student tended to present as having a challenging and difficult life. We also wanted to gauge the significance of different elements, such as students' family circumstances, or their health. This often demonstrated a complex mix between relative stability (e.g., of housing and schooling) and instability (e.g. repeated family breakups). The relationship between different aspect of students lives were traced and linked across the grid with connecting arrows. Explaining to participants that the significant 'events' could be experiences, thoughts and\or emotions for each theme in each time-frame helped to prevent the grids simply being lists of events. Typical responses to beginning to fill out a square on the grid included statements such as, 'Oh I wasn't very happy' or 'I really enjoyed' or 'I remember that was when x event occurred'. .

We designed a form which was filled in prior to the interview because co-constructing the life-grid was easier if standard data was collected in this way (for example, regarding age, gender, families educational achievement and so forth): interviewers could listen and note participants' accounts of key events without checking for specific data.

Students in our project were also asked to identify any factors (positive or negative) which they felt had impacted upon their education to date immediately prior to co-creating the life-grid. The researchers summarised these answers including any illustrative stories. For example, Lauren at Diversity, described how important education had been in her mother's financial independence and the influence this had on her. This initial question orientated us towards the students' disposition towards their education. Some students did not think they had any notable influences.

The ways in which life-grid interviews are positioned relative to other methods being used can be important. Ours preceded a recorded interview about the students first year at university. The unrecorded dialogue around the life-grid was useful for putting participants at ease and the joint nature of the task removed some of the awkwardness of meeting someone new: it created trust (Wilson et al., 2007). Interviewers have to make sure that they write synopses of participants' lives which also portray the stories and the 'emotional-flavour' of students' narrations. Empathetic listening skills and the ability to capture what participants are saying concisely is important. Allowing students to see and amend summaries is helpful.

Generating a life-grid with participants is a skilled task but the simple layout makes ongoing comparison between researchers easy and a reflexive approach allows discrepancies to inform the ongoing development of researchers' skills. Pilot interviews are helpful in

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checking the design works and we found filling in the life-grid ourselves useful. The standard time we had to spend on each grid was one hour but there was some flexibility and if we really felt the life-grid had not been developed well enough we either continued or arranged another meeting to complete it. However, in order to be resource efficient and to stick to our timetables we did stress time pressure. The students were also very busy and the two hours we asked of them to complete the life-grid and then participate in one hour recorded interview was difficult enough to negotiate. As others have found participants concentration and commitment to the task could waiver if it lasted too long (Wilson et al., 2007). Longer biographical interviews would have been unlikely to have worked with this group or have been practical to our research design which involved expensive and time constrained site visits.

Designing a life-grid would have some obvious advantages in a cross-cultural context. The debate which underpins the creation of the themes and the timescales is in itself an important part of the comparative endeavour. Decisions about what aspects of participants lives needed to be tracked across time encourages careful attention to what is being compared about individuals' lives, early on in the research. This forces clear articulation of the purpose of the biographical data and it could provide an opportunity for researchers from different countries to become more familiar with important aspects of one another's contexts. Opportunities to begin comparative dialogue early in projects are valuable (Crossley, 2008). The challenge would be to create a grid which would work across different countries.

Grids could possibly vary across countries, for example, to represent different schooling systems, but giving consideration as to how this would affect comparison could still be achieved early on. Our experience suggests that putting thought into how to structure grids is important. We should have added more post-compulsory divisions for older students. If there are insufficient or inappropriate divisions, concise recording of events becomes more difficult and effort has to be expended making sure the timing of content is clear. In international projects the issues of language and translation would have to be addressed.

Data Collection/Generation.

Life-grids have bought many of the advantages of more conventional biographical approaches to our study. Participants and interviewers co-produced "bricolages" from fragments of life, experienced retrospectively, through the conversation about key moments\events and construction the life-grid (Scott, 1998). Any activity designed to generate biographical data will have an effect that arises from its form (Tileagă, 2011): a grid of key events could lead to a representation of the dramatic but our probing questions and genuine interest in all elements of students' lives appeared to mediate against this (Breckner and Rupp, 2002). Stories were of friends students had, where they met them, who they used to play with and what they used to do. Students described their attachments to houses and places, relayed the emotional tone of their parents' relationships and their understanding of their parents employment. They also talked about their skills and abilities and their relationships with teachers in different educational settings

The form of the life-grid and the nature of the project inevitably directed students to foreground education in their stories. The information sheet telling students about the project, the standardised data recorded at the start of the interview, the open-ended question which asked students about positive or negative influences on their education, clearly orientated students, as did, placing the education column on the left hand side of the grid. They were not the open-ended account of a whole life that is typical of those following a life-history approach that starts with a single prompt such as 'tell me about your life' (Horsdal, 2011) but biographical research (Scott, 1998).

The visual nature of the life-grids orientates participants to the timings of events and experiences by facilitating cross-referencing between columns (Wilson et al., 2007). For

example, an event such as a house move is located through the school stage or the friendship group they had at the time. These 'visual anchors' are a feature of other techniques such as timelines or photo-elicitation interviews. However, life-grids do not determine what participants see as relevant: where educational experiences were outside of the timeframe we noted this in the content of the grid and rendered the differences transparent. Discussions, about where things should fit, the negotiated adjustments and the notes made were part of the co-construction of the life-grid.

Participants can be given a higher degree of control in the session by researchers positioning themselves as interpreters and scribes (Horsdal, 2011). Asking participants where to start filling in the grid, which boxes they would like to fill in next, checking they are satisfied with the summaries and being appreciative and empathetic are all methods of empowerment.   Participants self define key events in relation to the themes and the timeframes provided. They are also asked to attribute meaning to any boxes they choose to leave empty. Reasons for emptiness are recorded, for example, by putting arrows and brief notes through boxes in the grid when health is unchanged.

Events included in life-grids vary according to peoples' preoccupations and lives do not always fit neatly in the boxes. For example, one student focused his story around his religion, but students in our study indicated that they did not feel over constrained by the grid. In practice there were almost always arrows drawn between columns and notes which cross-referenced accounts between boxes and discussions about lack of fit. The degree to which students gave descriptive statements or narrated stories and anecdotes about the elements of their lives varied. For some the death of a grandparent or the birth of a sibling had a lot of significance and attracted a story and for others such events would just be noted without much comment and doubtless in many cases these were ignored altogether. What was seen as worthy of an anecdote or story and which passed without much comment becomes part of the analysis. However, we did seek clarification regarding misunderstandings, gaps and contradictions. For example, one student had not recorded any details of her step-mother in the standard data but when it came to filling in the life-grid the existence of a step-mother emerged in the stories. It transpired that the student did not wish to acknowledge her step-mother as a parent.

Many of the students commented that they found this activity enjoyable and rewarding. Some students did feel it strange having their lives laid out in a chart but they did not portray it as a negative experience. There were a few students who appeared to be more reticent about sharing experiences, for example, a student who made oblique references to racist abuse at school but did not respond to probing questions. In these cases the interviewer's notes indicated this.

Research participants relayed sensitive issues in a comparatively pragmatic way: the physical and practical nature of the task seemed to decrease emotional discomfort (Wilson et al., 2007).. The life-grids produced intimate representations and included: stories of family and relationship breakdown; abusive relationships; bullying; financial difficulties; health problems; and, so forth. The ethical protocols ensuring that students knew where to gain support should they need it were important.

The life-grid was also an invaluable resource for the interview that followed because questions could be tailored to individual students. The 'visual anchors' provided by the grid also helped us to get a quick grasp of personal detail and the intimacy of the exercise created a more comfortable relationship. As Wilson (2007) noted participants respond positively when you can remember and include detail from their lives in interviews. For example, when one student was talking about the difficulties she had with getting the space to work at home the interviewer already had an understanding of the way that the family unit altered over time and the impact this had on the student's private space. We had knowledge of the significant

people in students' lives and the types of relationships they had with them. We already had a sense of their financial circumstances and the type of educational experiences they had. Interviewing students about their first year experience from this position changed the interview substantially.

Developing and maintain relationships with the case-study students over the three years was made easier by the life-grid. As is the case with much longitudinal research there would be a gap of a year between our conducting one interview and the next. We revisited the life-grids each year with the 31 case-study students. Students' checked they were still happy with them as representations of their lives. At their request a few minor details were sometimes changed. Life-grids were also useful when for logistical reasons we could not re-interview the same people. Each year we read the life-grids and the previous interview data and during the interview for that year we clarified anything in this data that we did not understand. The content of the life-grid and the previous interview(s) informed our questions and responses.

Our experience of life-grids suggests that carefully designed life-grids and appropriately skilled researchers would produce adequate biographical data to generate a basis for cross-cultural comparison. The relative brevity of the interviews and the method of recording the data allows for resources to be concentrated elsewhere. They do not require the hours of transcription required for recorded biographies or last the several hours or take subsequent revisits often associated with life-history interviews (West, 1996). In addition the grid makes it easier to check that researchers are producing similar quality data. Different language grids may cause problems in terms of comparing translations but the brevity of the grid may make this a less difficult task. In addition this concise form also allows for a more ongoing and engaging dialogue about participants' lives and their representation to take place Fully transcribed interviews are much harder to digest and utilise in this way.

The life-grids in the analysis and interpretation of data.

The life-grids have been an important source of data that have allowed us to analyse the backgrounds of students and to begin to categorise students' lives in different ways: advantages commonly associated with biographical approaches (Erel, 2007). For example, rather than just thinking of similarities and differences between students in terms of structural factors (class, gender, age and so forth) we can consider differences in experience and trajectories. We noticed a striking contrast between the extremely settled lives of some students (same parents, housing, few schools etc.) and the extreme turbulence that other students had encountered (many different parental\guardian relationships, changes of housing and schooling etc.). Closer analysis of this has opened up a line of questioning about how biographical detail influences the way that students engage with the discipline of sociology and this holds true regardless of the institution they attend or other aspects of their background.

Writing synopses of case-study students from life-grid and interview data has helped us to develop a more holistic sense of these students which has also opened up new analytical strategies. For example, we have begun to reflexively interrogate the narrative style that students used to portray themselves within the life-grids and the interviews. Students typically use a similar 'script' across both data sets including in the narrative of the grid (Smith and McElwee, 2011). For example, a close analysis comparing two students has identified one students life being represented as an instance of "triumph over adversity" and another presents her significant achievements as if they were "insignificant". This re-examination of the data is leading us to question how we interpret what students say about the quality of provision and their experience of education. We have begun to explore the

pedagogic implications of students having specific narratives to represent themselves. For example, we suspect that these two students with similar class backgrounds would have very different pedagogical needs. This approach is being extended so that we are gaining a more complex understanding of the relationships between students' backgrounds and universities provision.

The qualitative data analysis package NVivo has also enhanced our ability to utilise the life-grid data in analysis. Each box of the interview forms an NVivo node (or code) which allows us to search biographical data in conjunction with, or in relation to, the thematic codes developed from the interviews (such as, orientation to the benefits of higher education). We have also kept the full-life grids to hand through our data storage and retrieval system in NVivo and this has allowed us to easily and frequently refer back to the life-grid when we are analysing interview data, video data and student work.

As stated above, these lines of analytical enquiry and the potential for developing concepts and theories which arise from them are in line with what many comparative researchers suggest is needed in cross-European research and case-based approaches**.**

Concluding Comments: Life-grids as a proposed method for comparative European educational research

We have demonstrated why we think life-grids could be used in comparative European case- based educational research. The project we discuss here uses life-grids to explore the trajectories of higher education students in England. However, we are also using life-grids productively in a new project exploring university lecturers' experiences and backgrounds and life-grids are being developed for use in a South African context.

Key advantages of using life-grids over conventional biographical interviews include the benefit of a comparative framework being more clearly developed during the research design stage. This encourages early and continuous dialogue regarding how comparisons will be made throughout the project and in a comparative-European context it could facilitate conversations about the likely relationships between different national educational structures and biographical experiences. The concise and easily digestible nature of the grids makes a more ongoing analysis of the quality of the biographical data produced by different researchers more viable. In addition the grid format prepares data for comparative analysis which can be pre-coded before being put into NVivo and the whole life-grid can be linked to cases so that concise biographical data is accessible for continuous reference during analysis.

Conducting life-history research which pre-structures a life-story for comparative analysis may seem to go against the principals of biographical research which more usually begins with unstructured interviews. For example, see Chamberlayne et al's (2002) edited collection of papers which is based on comparative biographical analysis using the Biographical-Narrative Interpretive Method. However, if an appropriate life-gird is negotiated by a research team and it is used sensitively it does not have to over-determine what participants say. .

The succinctness of the life-grids means that fairly large numbers of biographical interviews can be generated and included in the analysis. Our project provides evidence that the biographical data produced would be sufficient to facilitate the complex interrogations of the interrelationship between social phenomena and peoples' lives. In addition participants' biographical incidents or narrative styles can be coded and can form part of a rigorous interpretation of data. For example, if our project were replicated across countries it would be possible to explore whether more turbulent biographies affected the ways that students related to sociological knowledge across a range of different national contexts.

There are of course shortcomings to this method, for example, the data is clearly not as dense as more intensive narrative methods. However, we believe that this little utilised methodology could be more widely used.

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