Intergenerational relationships and inequality: methodological and theoretical issues

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Life course perspective

Alerts us to

- Scheduling of social transitions and construction of trajectories
- Historical contexts in which life course unfolds
- Linked lives
- Dynamism of ‘outcomes’
Paradox

- More attention to stratification and destandardisation of the life course
- Less attention to how temporal changes influence pathways and identities
Transmission of resources across family generations

- Within families, not only between families
- What is transmitted
- What is received
- What is acted upon
Transmission as relationships

- Repeating difficulties
- Emotional ambivalence
- Love
- Forms of communication

Transmission not articulated
Ambivalences across the generations

- Structural,
- Interactional,
- Emotional

Social mobility has variable implications for relationships across family generations.
Transmission: disruption

• Events – predictable or unpredictable, some wished for and some not
• Critical moments or turning points lead to new meanings and actions
• Turning points as a conceptual bridge between subjectivity and social conditions
Methodological approach

• A biographic-narrative approach

• Linkage between unique and collective

• Approach more than a method-challenges meta narratives
A biographic-narrative approach

• Narrator at centre
• Narration governed by need to
  – condense story to important events
  – demonstrate their significance
  – provide detail

Stories as intergenerational transmission
Interpretation

Paying attention to temporality

- Biographical historical context of interviewees’ lives
- Narrative context: how stories about the past are told, meanings made in present time, with an eye to the future
An intergenerational study

- ESRC study of changes in fatherhood over 3 generations
- The influence of migration on fatherhood
- 30 chains of grandfathers, fathers and sons
- Life story/ biographic-narrative interview
The ‘middle years’ – parent and adult child relationships

• How migration interrupts or changes patterns of transmission

• The negotiation of intergenerational inequalities in context of increased longevity
Connor (GF) & Murray (F): Life course

- 1933 born Dublin; 7th child; orphaned at 2; institutional care; no qualifications
- 1958-61 1st migration
- 1960 2nd migration
- Construction worker; promoted to foreman and then site manager

- 1970 born London; 3rd of 3; attended RC schools; GCSEs
- 1987 1st job in insurance firm
- 1991 aged 21, trader on London Stock Exchange
Connor: Life story

- Distancing and downplaying of series of disasters
- Dramatic build up of story suggestive of a reversal of fortunes
- Performative quality and narrative skill
Connor: Life story

- Graphic detail of ‘lucky break’ narratively magnified by contrast with past misfortunes
- Metonym to convey success – company car
Murray: Life story

- Antithesis of father’s story
- Use of metonym – to convey his childhood and his life in the financial world
- Similarity in narrative – drama and performativity
Connor’s story of transmission to Murray

- Sought to pass on strong work ethic rejected by Murray
- Connor reports inability to pass on fathering practices to son; left childrearing to wife
- Passed on ‘luck’ and ‘what I had of myself’
Murray’s story of transmission from his father

• Identification with father as ‘sociable Irishman’ ‘I am nothing without him’
In conclusion

• Multiple dimensions that create continuity and change across families
• Invisible processes that make for equality and inequality
• How differences are managed

*Fathers and Sons: Generations, Families and Migration*
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