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## Explaining Macro-Social Change with Archived Data: Reading against the Grain

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**Abstract** This article examines some of the opportunities and challenges associated with using archived qualitative data to explain macro-social change through a biographical lens. Using examples from a recent research project on family change in Ireland, I show how working across qualitative datasets provided opportunities for generating new explanations of social change by ‘reading against the grain’ of established social science narratives and tracing innovation in social practices. I also discuss some of the methodological challenges associated with working across datasets and how we addressed them in the study.

**Keywords** social change, qualitative longitudinal data, secondary analysis, families, Ireland

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### Introduction: Biographical Data and the Explanation of Macro-Social Change

Biographical and life course approaches speak directly to C. Wright Mills’ (1980 [1959]) understanding of the sociological imagination as ‘the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and social world,’ and have been at the heart of research oriented towards explaining macro-social change since the origins of the discipline (Neale 2015). Yet, despite their promise, such approaches have faced critique from within. In a recent article, Heinz (2016:34) suggested that ‘without focused questions and a conceptual framework,’ qualitative life course research risks failing to move

beyond 'naïve empiricism.' Atkinson and Delamont (2006:169, 168-169) criticised what they saw as a tendency towards the collection of narratives in an uncritical and celebratory fashion and called for a sustained commitment to an analytic stance, one that requires 'a degree of distance from the narrative materials we collect, analyse and reproduces.'

These challenges seem especially daunting when researchers attempt to use qualitative sources to explain long-term change. We need to ensure that our analyses of qualitative biographical data do more than simply provide appealing descriptive accounts of individual experiences. Our aim is also to use participant narratives to document and trace the *processes* through which changing individual experiences and actions gave rise to socio-historical transformation. Strategies of comparative and narrative analysis (Maxwell 2004:251-256) are central to the development of causal explanations of process in qualitative research designs. Some of the most fruitful developments in this direction are occurring within the life course perspective, as scholars develop innovative approaches to the biographical analysis of timing, sequencing and agency within human lives, often incorporating sequential and mixed method research designs (see, e.g., Hollstein 2018; Nico 2016).

In this article, using examples from a recent research project on long-term patterns of family change in Ireland, I argue that secondary analysis of archived data facilitates a qualitative explanation of these processes in a number of ways. First, the use of archived data adds *scale* to the qualitative researcher's toolkit,

creating enhanced opportunities for comparison and claims to generalisability (Davidson et al. 2018). Second, the use of such data provides opportunities for comparison from multiple perspectives or standpoints (Tarrant and Hughes 2018). In our study, addressing the challenges of working across datasets that were collected using different methodologies and with different time horizons provided enhanced opportunities for understanding the process of social change by facilitating multiple perspectival comparisons within and across generations. Third, I suggest that qualitative secondary analysis can sometimes help us to move beyond describing towards explaining the processes of macro-social change, by 'distancing' the researcher from the source material (see Irwin and Winterton 2012; Coltart et al. 2013; Irwin et al. 2014).

However, there are shortcomings. First, the researcher must constantly deal with limitations presented by the uneven content and quality of biographical and other interview data and, in particular, gaps in the potential for comparative analysis posed by lacunae in participant life narratives, different research designs or simply by variations in interviewer practice. This raises the risk that some narratives carry too much weight in the 'assemblage' of cases (Davidson et al. 2018). Strategies of filling in 'what is unsaid' (Brannen 2004:426) by drawing on secondary information or linked mixed-method data can help to address this problem (though not perfectly). Second, systematic and rigorous analysis of comparatively big volumes of archived qualitative data is time-consuming and may be unattractive to researchers working under pressure to publish early and often. Some ways to

address this may include team working and the use of 'quasi-statistics' or other formal procedures to assist with the selection of cases for intensive analysis (Maxwell 2004). Both strategies – of filling in the blanks and of using contextual information to situate data – facilitate the 'distancing' that enables comparative analysis and data cross-checking.

The article begins with a brief description of the Irish Qualitative Data Archive and the 'Family Rhythms' study which stimulated the reflections in this article. This is followed by two examples of how working across archived biographical data opened a different window on the process of family change in Ireland by 'reading against the grain' (Savage 2005) of established narratives and through the development of analytical strategies for capturing innovation. Finally, I discuss some of the challenges and limitations we encountered, but also the opportunities that remain for a more generative and rigorous approach to analysing the processes giving rise to the transformation of Irish society in the 20th century.

## **The 'Family Rhythms' Study and the Irish Qualitative Data Archive**

The 'Family Rhythms' study was funded in 2011 by the Irish Research Council as a Government of Ireland Senior Research Fellowship in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The study had two aims: (1) to develop a fresh understanding of family change in modern Ireland, incorporating cutting-edge theoretical perspectives and drawing on two major new datasets recently deposited in the Irish Qualitative Data Archive; (2) to disseminate

learning from the experience of re-using qualitative data and to promote further sharing and reuse. As its principal output, the study led to the publication of an innovative textbook (Gray, Geraghty and Ralph 2016). The datasets in question were Life Histories and Social Change (Gray et al. 2015), and qualitative data collected as part of the National Longitudinal Study on Children – Growing Up in Ireland (Williams et al. 2017). Both datasets had been deposited in the Irish Qualitative Data Archive. IQDA was established at Maynooth University in 2008 as a central access point for qualitative social science data generated in or about Ireland. It received initial funding as part of the Irish Social Science Platform, under the Irish Government's Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions, Cycle 4 (PRTL4). Subsequently, IQDA became a founding member of the Digital Repository of Ireland, which was established with funding under PRTL5. Today, the DRI provides a trusted infrastructure for the preservation and dissemination of data deposited in IQDA.

Life Histories and Social Change (LHSC) and Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) have a shared feature which created interesting opportunities for the analysis of long-term patterns of family change. Both are linked to quantitative panel studies. The participants who opted in to LHSC had previously taken part in the Irish module of the European Community Household Panel, from 1994 to 2001. The participants in the qualitative module of Growing Up in Ireland were a subset of respondents to an ongoing panel study of two cohorts of Irish children – a 'child cohort,' aged nine years when the study began in the mid-2000s, and an

‘infant cohort,’ aged nine months. Alongside the quantitative survey, qualitative data were collected with both cohorts during the first wave of data collection. The Family Rhythms study focused on the child cohort.<sup>1</sup>

While both qualitative datasets are linked to quantitative panels, there are also significant differences between them. LHSC includes participants within three birth-cohorts (born before 1935, between 1945 and 1954, and between 1965 and 1974), which were selected by the original researchers because their lives traversed periods of significant change and transformation in Irish society. The researchers aimed to ensure that the sample incorporated diversity by gender, social class and place of residence. The study was designed to collect *retrospective life narratives* using a weakly structured, in-depth approach to interviewing. Life history calendars and simple, retrospective social network schedules were also collected at the time of interview. GUI includes semi-structured interviews with children born in 1997-1998 and their parents. The researchers selected participants from the main, quantitative panel study to ensure diversity by class, gender and place of residence. The dataset also includes a number of research instruments designed to capture aspects of the children’s current development, their personal networks and their visions of the future. Because the GUI qualitative interviews were embedded within a continuing panel, they have a *prospective* temporal orientation.

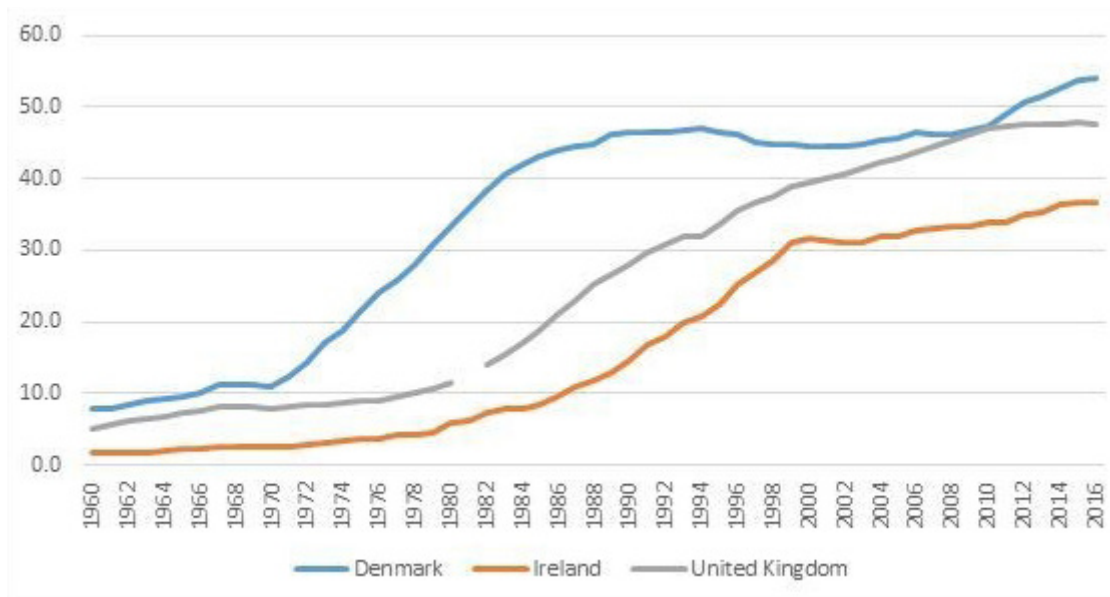
<sup>1</sup> The present author was a principal investigator on the original Life Histories and Social Change Study. Unfortunately, no subsequent waves of qualitative data collection have been carried out in the Growing Up in Ireland Study.

In the next sections, I discuss some of the ways in which working within and across the two datasets yielded new insights and explanations. I begin with a discussion of how the LHSC interviews challenged us to ‘read against the grain’ of established narratives about sexuality and family formation in 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland.

### Reading against the Grain: Interrogating Established Narratives

Standard quantitative data suggest that the rate of non-marital childbearing remained below 5% – less than half that of comparable countries – in Ireland until the 1980s, but then ‘took off,’ reaching nearly one-third of all births by the late 1990s (see Figure 1, which shows births outside marriage in Ireland, compared with Denmark and the United Kingdom). This represented a rapid increase that contrasts with other changes associated with the ‘second demographic transition’ such as rates of cohabitation and divorce (Billari and Liebfroer 2010; Van de Kaa 1987). Both trends have also moved upwards in Ireland, but much more steadily. Rates of separation and divorce, in particular, show little sign of converging with those of other northern European countries (Fahey 2012; 2014). Legislative changes, including the introduction of income support for lone mothers in 1973, and the prohibition of discrimination against children born outside marriage in 1987, formed part of the backdrop for the ‘take-off’ in non-marital births (Fahey and Nixon 2014:130). Rates of lone parenthood remain comparatively high in Ireland, in part due to a low rate of entry into second unions (Fahey 2014:57).

Figure 1. Proportion of live births outside marriage 1960-2014, Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom



Source: Eurostat fertility indicators [demo\_find]

The statistical evidence on change since the 1970s accompanies a public and scholarly narrative about the earlier subjugation of sexuality and oppression of women who became pregnant outside marriage (Inglis 1998). At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there was a perception, in Ferriter's (2009:1) words, that 'a country long accustomed to a strict policing of sexual morality had carnally come of age.' This is contrasted with an earlier regime of 'harsh treatment and institutionalisation of women who became pregnant outside marriage' (Connolly 2014:28). In 1972, when the advocacy group for lone parents, 'Cherish,' was established, 'single pregnant women were often thrown out of their homes, lost their jobs and were rejected by their communities. It was extremely difficult for them to keep and raise their children themselves.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <https://onefamily.ie/about-us/our-history/> Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> February 2019.

Some scholars have suggested that, precisely because of this repressive approach to non-marital pregnancy, the data on births outside marriage before the 1970s may be somewhat inaccurate (Aalen 1963, Sklar 1977). Many such births would not have been recorded in the Irish statistics because they took place in Britain, as unmarried women migrated to avoid the stigma of giving birth at home (Garrett 2000). Nevertheless, the prevailing narrative of family trends in 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland corresponds to what Thornton (2001) described as the 'developmental paradigm,' which understands family change as a 'great transition' from traditional to modern and which, as a set of ideas ('developmental idealism'), independently influences changes in family behaviour. While many of the historical assumptions underpinning the developmental paradigm have been contradicted by research, they continue to exert a powerful influence both



on scholarly depictions of family change – for example, in the literature on ‘individualisation’ (see, e.g. Beck-Gernsheim 1998) – and in popular understanding. In the Irish case, applying this paradigm to what we think we know about non-marital fertility leaves other questions open. For example, why did additional ‘modernising’ trends not converge at the same rate? Why did the shift towards the acceptance of births outside marriage not generate the same degree of cultural conflict as other normative changes (such as those surrounding contraception, divorce and abortion)?

A reading of archived life story interviews allows us to probe more deeply into the diversity of the lived experience of non-marital pregnancy and, in turn, to re-frame our understanding of the statistical evidence, thereby challenging the dominant narrative. First, it is evident that at least some women managed to survive as single parents before the 1970s, albeit at the risk of rejection on the part of their families. Patrick (LHA42)<sup>3</sup> was raised by a single mother in the 1930s: ‘[T]here is a brother of hers, his wife would walk to the far side of the street when she’d see my mother coming down, and his son didn’t know my mother was his aunt until he was 20 years of age, so that was the era we lived in.’ Second, it becomes clear that the data convey a false impression of the rate of non-marital pregnancies because they were followed quickly by ‘shotgun’ weddings. For example, Rosemary (LHA16, born in the mid-1920s), described an inter-generational pattern of marriage following pregnancy within

her working-class family, and how this was adapted to the prevailing norms about sexual virtue in different socio-historical contexts:

INT: And what about your sons – would you have given them any advice or said anything to them, if they were courting?

RESP: Well, well the eldest fella got his bird [girlfriend] into trouble and he had to marry her; so did the second fella; and the third fella, no, he got married ok [...]

INT: And when you said they had to get married, how did that happen?

RESP: Because she, they maintained they were pregnant [laughs] and they had to marry them.

INT: But you have another son who was living with his partner before they got married?

RESP: [...] [T]hey lived together because they couldn’t afford to get married and she wanted a white wedding, and of course she wasn’t my daughter for me to tell her that you don’t have a white wedding when you have a baby. I know, I didn’t like anything like that, because I know my Mam always said if you’re not a virgin you don’t go out in white. It’s old fashioned ideas, but that is true. Now, I have a brother, and he did marry, but he was married behind the Pro-Cathedral because she was seven months pregnant.

Thus a pattern of non-marital pregnancy followed by marriage occurred within Rosemary’s family from at least as early as the 1950s through the 1980s. What changed between her own generation (illustrated by her brother’s experience), and that of her sons, was a decline in the stigmatisation of relationships, pregnancies and births before marriage

<sup>3</sup> All names were changed to protect participant confidentiality. The codes following the names identify the transcripts within the archive (see Gray et al. 2015).

through symbols such as the colour of the wedding dress and 'hidden' weddings behind the church. Other life stories include accounts of addressing non-marital pregnancy by incorporating unmarried mothers and their children within extended family groups. For example, Rose (LHB32), born in the 1950s, and also from an urban working class background, remembered how her parents decided to take in her older sister's child:

[S]he had a child when she was twenty; now this would have been back in [the late 1960s], and it wasn't the done thing [...], but my mother and father took the child and legally adopted her, and although she is technically my niece, she's my sister; she was reared as a sister to the rest of us. [...] I just remember being told that [my sister] was going to have a baby and that neither two of us were to tell anybody. [...] I actually stood for [my niece], I was her godmother, and then after that, she was just a sister.

Other narratives reveal that parents were prepared to help their pregnant, unmarried daughters in other ways. Linda (LHB07), born in the 1950s, was a doctor's daughter:

[T]here was a bit of a discussion then about would I go to England and have the baby because my... [mother's] sister lived in Liverpool. And I could have gone over there, once I was kept out of the way, have the baby and then have the baby adopted and come back home. But I wouldn't hear of it [...] So then when I was determined to get married, well then I got married. And it was arranged pretty quickly. So I wasn't married in my parish church, married at the Pro-Cathedral actually. There were just about twen-

ty-five, thirty people including, you know, aunts and things like that.

Linda felt that her social class identity differentiated her from those who were forced to give birth in mother and baby homes: '[A]ll these stories that have come out now and all these films, the Magdalene Sisters and all these things, [...] they actually affected me greatly. Because I realised that there but for the upbringing, for the upper-class upbringing, how shall I put it, or whatever, there but for the grace of God went I.'

Clearly, we cannot make any inference about the *prevalence* of non-marital pregnancies, births and lone parenthood from these life story narratives. However, such stories are sufficiently common in the qualitative data that they problematise the binary representation of Irish social history as a sharp transition from an era of sexual repression and suppression of non-marital births to an era of rapid liberation from the late 1970s onwards. They also remind us to ask questions about what statistical data actually measure and raise new topics for further empirical research. Thus, official data on the rate of non-marital births are really measuring a change in how women and their families *managed* non-marital pregnancies; they do not tell us much about how frequently pregnancies occurred outside marriage. It remains likely that strong social sanctions against non-marital pregnancy suppressed sexual activity outside marriage and ensured that most resulted either in shotgun marriages or concealed adoption – within the mother's family or through external institutions, either in Ireland or overseas.

The life stories also raise significant questions about how the experience and familial management of non-marital births varied across time and social context, which in turn imply theoretical questions about the nature and origin of societal change and raise new questions for research. Using quantitative evidence, Hannan (2014:40) demonstrated the continuing impact of social class on individual chances of marriage and childbirth across the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland, even in the context of significant normative changes from the 1970s onwards. Stories such as Linda's show that middle-class families were able to mobilise greater resources when a daughter became unexpectedly pregnant. But what were the factors enabling some working-class urban families (such as Rosemary's) to avoid the most severe consequences of transgressing dominant societal values relating to sexual and family life? It is notable that all of the examples above, depicting the management of non-marital pregnancy through shotgun marriage or within the extended family, come from urban settings. Were rural families, for whom the transmission of property remained of vital importance, less tolerant of sexual transgression and pregnancy outside marriage?

These questions pose interesting challenges, not only for prevailing public discourses on social change but also for macro-sociological theories of modernisation and family life. Qualitative life history narratives offer the potential to interrogate the interplay between individual and class processes giving rise to the trends depicted in quantitative evidence. In the next section, I discuss how one influential sociological argument – that the transition to modernity entailed a transformation in power rela-

tions across the generations within families – can be documented and traced through secondary analysis of life story interviews. I also show how this reading leads us to look again at the change 'sideways,' displacing the centrality of households in the sociological narrative of macro-social change.

### **Capturing Innovation: Specifying the Origins of Social Change**

Giele (1998) has emphasised the potential for life course research to capture innovation – that is, to identify the conjunctures at which pioneering patterns of behaviour begin to be institutionalised, to become 'normative'. Recent scholarship has proposed that, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a long-term shift in the balance of power across generations leading to a decline in inter-generational co-residence (Ruggles 2011). In the Family Rhythms study, we adopted a strategy of reading 'backwards' and 'forwards' across the data, following the different temporal perspectives of the participants, to document and explain this 'big' change in the structure of family relationships by tracing it across different generational and historical standpoints (Gray, Geraghty and Ralph 2013; Geraghty and Gray 2017). We were able to show how the key transformation occurred in the position of parents, whose power as 'mediators' between grandparents and grandchildren increased alongside growing opportunities for independence as the structure of the Irish economy changed.

From the perspective of grandchildren, there was marked continuity in the warm relationships experienced across generational and historical time



(Gray, Geraghty and Ralph 2015). However, we also noted how the social and spatial contexts within which grandparent-grandchild relationships are enacted have shrunk alongside changes in the social construction of childhood and the increased power of parents. Although many contemporary grandparents play a critical role in supporting parental employment, there has been a secular, long-term shift in the norms governing their role within the family, alongside the critical transformation of power relations that occurred during the last century. Today, grandparents describe their role as an ambivalent one, balancing a requirement to 'be there' for parents if required, but otherwise minding their own business (Mason et al. 2007).

Population ageing has raised interesting questions about the changing structure of multi-generational relationships within families (Bengston 2001). Although trends in fertility, mortality and longevity seem to imply shifts in the demographic availability of different kinds of relationships between grandparents, parents and children, specifying changes in the structure of multi-generational families has proven more difficult than expected (Arpino et al. 2018; Herlofson and Hagestad 2011; Puur et al. 2011), even before we begin to consider the implications of those changes for transformations in family meanings and practices. Our qualitative longitudinal study design offered an alternative window on these significant transformations in family life, allowing us not only to document these long-term changes in rich detail but also to examine the critical moments within inter-generational relationships and historical contexts at which people responded to unfamiliar constraints and adopted new practices that initiated change. .

Here I provide a small number of examples that illustrate the transformation of inter-generational relationships within families and across historical time, from different generational *standpoints*, focusing on the theme of residential proximity and co-residence.<sup>4</sup>

Kathleen (LHA11) was born in 1924 into a small-farm household, which her parents and siblings shared with her father's stepbrother. Her paternal grandparents had died before she was born, but she and her siblings enjoyed strong, everyday relationships with her mother's parents who lived 'a stone's throw' away. She remembered calling in to her grandmother every day on her way home from school. Kathleen worked as a domestic servant until her marriage in the early 1950s, when she shared a household with her husband's mother and brother. She continued to enjoy a good relationship with her own mother as she aged: 'I used to love going over to her on a Sunday when she got older and make a cup of tea and wash the few delph and go for a bit of walk.' Later, she looked after her own grandson after school: 'I had [my grandson] coming here from when he was 4 until he was 12 and he started secondary school, coming here every evening after his school; I had him here for the dinner and his homework.' However, when her son left for America at the end of the 1980s [estimated], following a divorce, the move provoked a crisis for Kathleen and her husband, because it separated them from their grandchildren: '[W]hat broke my heart entirely was they were here and [my husband] started crying here one day...[A]nd he said...why didn't they leave us one of them? How could they for God's sake?'

<sup>4</sup> These examples are provided for illustrative purposes in this article. The analysis that the vignettes are intended to illustrate has been reported in Geraghty et al. (2014).

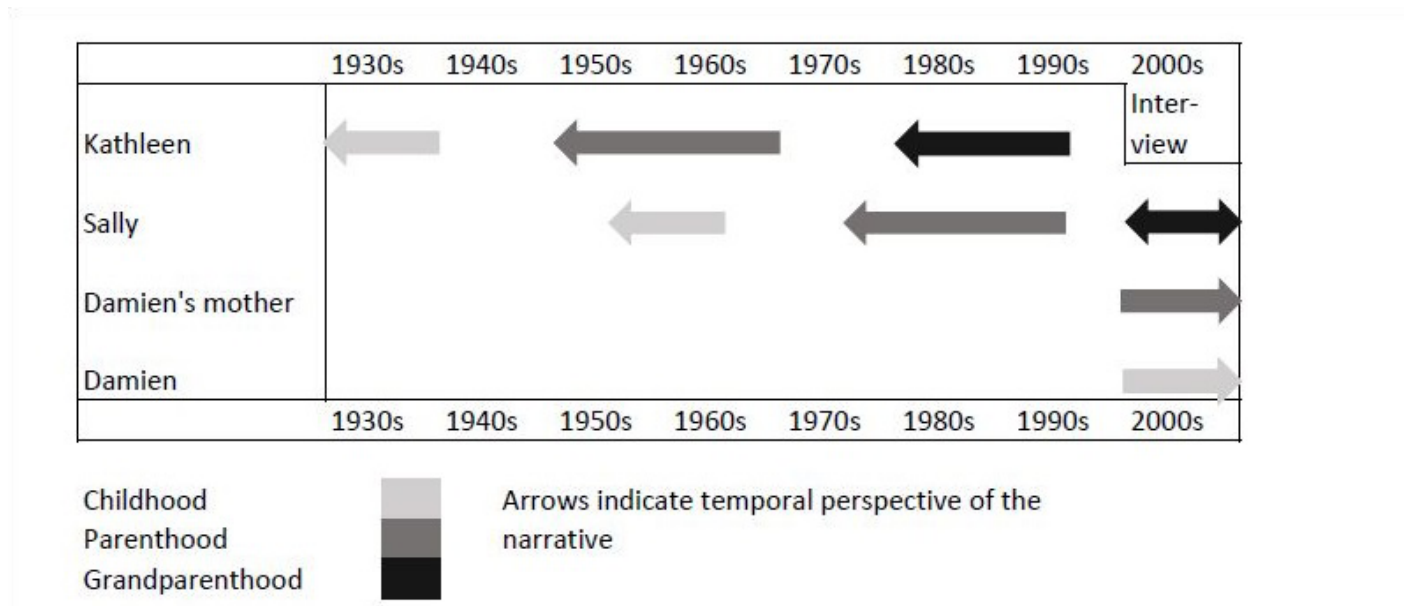
Sally (LHB25, born 1949) also grew up in a farming family and has warm memories of her paternal grandmother who lived in the family home until she died: 'I'll always remember coming home from school, and if my mother wasn't there...Granny was always there to give the dinner to us.' But Sally also remembered that her mother found sharing a home with her mother-in-law to be difficult: 'I remember her saying she found it hard when she got married first and the granny, being such a hard worker, expected, I think, Mammy to be working as hard.' After she left school, Sally worked in a clerical job in the city, before marrying a farmer, in her turn, in the mid-1970s. She moved in with his mother and brothers but was at pains to emphasise that her mother-in-law lived in a separate extension built on to the house, and that this was planned before she moved in. Nevertheless, she found her new circumstances to be challenging: 'I actually came into a situation of cooking dinners for a mother-in-law, a husband and two brother-in-laws...and I don't know if I was a good cook.' While they were not 'all in the one kitchen,' Sally's mother-in-law was of great help to her when raising her own children: 'I would run to Nana if...I was worried.' At the time of her interview in 2007, Sally had just become a grandmother herself, and she was enjoying 'going up and down' to help her daughter at weekends.

Damien (GUI0085) was born in 1998 and participated in the Growing Up in Ireland study. His mother, who works full-time, describes herself as a parent with exceptional levels of support. Following the breakup of her relationship, she and Damien moved back to her place of origin, in or-

der to be close to her own parents. Her new partner has recently moved in. Damien spends a lot of time with his grandmother, who picks him up after school and minds him until his mother finishes work. Although Damien's mother feels lucky to have her parents' support, she also expresses ambivalence about the extent of her parents' involvement in Damien's life, saying that she worries about '[my] parents being too involved, losing your say, really, because it is kind of like their child sometimes.' She and her new partner would like to be more independent, but she fears that if they made other childcare arrangements, it would be like 'taking their limbs away.' She hopes that, over time, Damien will simply become 'too busy' for the intense relationship he currently has with his grandparents. For the present, Damien told the interviewer that his grandmother was someone he would talk to about his day and that: 'I get on really good with my Granddad as well.'

The vignettes illustrate patterns of continuity and change in multi-generational proximity and co-residence across the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland. Figure 2 provides a schematic representation of the generational standpoints, across different historical periods, that the interviews make available to the researcher, using the examples discussed here. Damien's mother's interview differs from those of Kathleen and Sally, because the focus of her interview is on her son's experience and it does not include any reference to her own childhood memories. However, her perspective as a parent, together with Damien's perspective as a child in 2008, provide a contemporary *forward-looking* baseline against which Kathleen's and Sally's *backward-looking* experiences can be contrasted.

Figure 2. Three cases illustrating generational standpoints by historical time in the *Family Rhythms* study



Sources: Gray et al. 2015; Williams et al. 2017. Arrows show the temporal orientation of the participants' narratives. See text for further elaboration.

We can see evidence of continuity in the pattern of inter-generational relationships over time, but also that the meaning and form of aspects of those relationships changed. The vignettes include three narratives from the perspective of a *grandchild*: Kathleen's memories (1930s); Sally's memories (mid-1950s-mid-1960s); and Damien's contemporary experience (2000s). Each of these narratives portrayed the relationship with grandparents as a positive one, centred on experiences of interaction while being cared for. In only one case (Sally) did that caring take place in the context of inter-generational co-residence. Proximate residence to a grandparent occurred for different reasons in Kathleen's and Damien's narratives. In Kathleen's case, this occurred as part of the marital strategies pursued by small farmers within west of Ireland communities in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

(famously depicted by Arensberg and Kimball 2001 [1940]). In Damien's case, proximate residence occurred as a consequence of parental divorce and his working mother's need for support with child-care.

The vignettes also include three narratives from the perspective of being a parent, although Kathleen's interview included less content on the experience of being a parent of young children in the 1950s and sixties (a problem I refer to again below), than did those of Sally (1980s-90s) and Damien's mother (2000s). Both Kathleen and Sally raised their children in households shared with their husbands' mothers and adult siblings. However, Sally's account of her experience reveals that values surrounding such practices were changing at the time of her marriage; the family made a sig-

nificant effort to separate the living spaces of the generations and to ensure that the women had separate kitchens. Sally describes her own mother's experience as characterised by tensions over the division of labour whereas she is positive about receiving support from her mother-in-law. Kathleen did not dwell on her relationship with her co-residing mother-in-law, but spoke positively about the continuation of a warm relationship with her own mother who lived nearby, in an inter-generational pattern that echoed that experienced in her childhood. Damien's mother conveys considerable ambivalence about the extent to which she is dependent on her parents and about the quality of Damien's relationship with them. Her new partnership has prompted a feeling that she should be more independent and that the centre of gravity within Damien's family life should move towards his new stepfather and stepbrother.

Finally, the vignettes provide two narratives from the perspective of being a grandparent of young grandchildren – those of Kathleen (1980s-90s) and Sally (2000s). With Sally's narrative, the perspectives of looking 'backwards' and 'forwards' converged in historical time, as her contemporary experience of being a grandparent (at the time of interview) coincided with Damien's experience of being a grandchild. For Kathleen, her role as grandparent involved passing on traditional values that she felt were being undermined in contemporary society. However, Kathleen's willingness to care for her grandson while her daughter-in-law was at work, and her narrative about the loss of grandchildren through divorce and emigration, also reveal that she has been an agent in those changes. There were many

accounts in LHSC of parents sending grandchildren to live with grandparents (Gray 2014), including in the context of parental emigration, but in contrast to her husband, Kathleen rejected this as an option within her adult children's generation. Sally was delighted to have recently become a grandparent. She talked about how it was possible to enjoy the time spent with her grandchild more than with her own children, because as a young mother she had been so busy caring for an extended family household and providing for the working men on the farm. However, because Sally had to commute to spend time with her grandchild and support her son and daughter-in-law, there remained also a certain social distance between the two households at the time of interview.

At one level of analysis, the changes depicted in these vignettes correspond very well to prevailing sociological and public narratives about family change in Ireland. During the 1960s, when Kathleen and her husband were raising their family, and Sally was growing up, social values began to shift towards a greater emphasis on individualism, and in particular, on the interests of the parental generation within families. Alongside changes in the structure of the economy, these normative shifts contributed towards a significant change in the character of inter-generational relationships by the 1980s, when Sally and her husband were raising their family and Kathleen was becoming a grandparent. By the time Sally had become a grandparent herself, the balance of power between grandparent and parent had changed significantly, such that Sally depicted the relationship as a gift – one that Damien's mother contemplated taking away.

Yet reading the biographical narratives ‘against the grain’ of the developmental paradigm reveals how these changes occurred within shared family meanings and memories of relationships that stretched across multiple generations. Family change occurs subtly within a historical flow that also gives rise to continuity and the return of ‘traditional’ practices in new forms (such as parental reliance on grandparental care) – a process that Duncan (2011) has described as ‘bricolage.’ This opens a new window on macro-sociological theories of family change, revealing in a different way how our theoretical models have been limited by the focus on household living arrangements and the parental social role, neglecting the centrality of multi-generational relationships and biographical memory in people’s family practices. This reading also raises new questions about interesting variations that could be explored across historical time – such as changes in inter-generational practices and the quality of relationships on the mother’s and father’s side (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1992).

## Challenges and Opportunities

The examples above give some indication of the potential that archived qualitative data hold for displacing established narratives, understanding the intersection between biography and history, and developing new explanations of long-term patterns of family change. However, there are undoubtedly significant challenges associated with analysing retrospective life history interviews and working across qualitative datasets in the manner that I have described. First, there is a range of difficulties associated with variations in the nature

of memory at different life stages (Keightley 2010) and disentangling ‘how accounts relate to lived experience and how informants move between the remembered experiences of past and present’ (Brannen 2004:426).

Kathleen’s interview (described above) illustrates these challenges very well. Referring to her childhood in the 1920s and thirties, she told the interviewer that:

I remember there was a child born in the house next door to us...and this baby was born out of marriage, and it was the first Friday in August; I can remember that now but I can’t remember what happened last year.

She reflected extensively on her disapproval of some aspects of contemporary social life and was proud of the contribution she made to instilling traditional values in her grandchildren. However, she contributed almost no memories of parenting her children when they were young and very little information about the socio-economic context in which she raised them. Making sense of Kathleen’s story thus requires the researcher to attempt to ‘fill in what is unsaid’ (Brannen 2004:426), drawing on existing scholarship about the time period in question and on other narratives referring to that time – either from within Kathleen’s birth cohort or from memories such as those contributed by Sally.

Other lacunae derive from variations in research design and interviewer practice. Because the LHSC interviews were only loosely guided and the participants were encouraged to tell their stories in their own words, historical and biographical ‘gaps’ ap-



pear in some of the life narratives, making comparison more difficult. By contrast, the GUI interviews were semi-structured, and the interviewers consistently ensured that participants addressed the pre-determined themes. However, this approach tended to promote consistency at the expense of depth, contributing a larger quantity of 'thinner' narratives that were less generative for interpretive analysis and explanation.

Both kinds of lacunae increase the likelihood that the life stories and narratives of some participants carry more weight in our analyses than others. The researcher may find herself returning more frequently to those who, like Kathleen, provide rich and evocative narratives, or who like Sally, contribute a coherent account of change across their lives within a particular domain, or who like Damien's mother, volunteer more detailed and reflexive answers to semi-structured questions. These threats to validity are common to all qualitative social science research (see Maxwell 2004), but they may be exacerbated within studies that aim to work across datasets to explain 'big' patterns of social change. 'Scaling up' qualitative research in this way can help to 'fill in the gaps' by assembling cases across historical periods and generational standpoints, as I have shown above, but it may also exacerbate the risk that the researcher becomes wedded to a particular description and explanation of the pattern of change, relying too much on those interviews and narrative segments that support the argument and neglecting others.

There are, of course, well-established approaches to dealing with such validity threats within the lit-

erature on qualitative social science methodology. Perhaps the most common injunction is to deliberately seek out and analyse discrepant or negative cases. However, when the researcher is seeking to analyse very large numbers of cases, carrying this out rigorously and systematically may require more resources and time than are available. In this context, the use of 'quasi-statistics' can be invaluable, enabling the researcher 'to assess the amount of evidence that bears on a particular conclusion or threat, from how many different sources they were obtained, and how many discrepant instances exist' (Maxwell 2004:258). Quasi-statistics can also support the process of maintaining analytic distance, facilitating phased recursive strategies of moving between mapping across many cases for breadth, and intensive interrogation of individual cases for depth (Davidson et al. 2018). There is considerable potential for researchers engaged in the analysis of 'big' qualitative data to learn from recent scholarship on the logic of enquiry within the field of comparative social science research (see Mahoney and Goertz 2012; Cooper et al. 2012). Within the Family Rhythms study, we were able to draw on data derived from quantitative panel studies in which both qualitative studies were embedded to facilitate 'quasi-statistical' strategies. In the case of LHSC, we also had the benefit of the systematic data provided by the life history calendars and social network schedules collected alongside the narrative interviews. Such 'mixed approaches' (Nico 2016) are likely to play an increasingly important role as researchers take advantage of the opportunities presented by the growing practice of archiving qualitative social science data.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have argued in favour of the potential for archived biographical and qualitative life course data to develop new explanations of long-term patterns of macro-social change. Using examples from the 'Family Rhythms' study, I have suggested ways in which such data enable us to 'read against the grain' of established social science and public narratives, and to trace patterns of innovation and change across historical time from multiple biographical and generational standpoints. In doing so, I have situated myself within a 'realist' approach to qualitative social science analysis (Miller 2000) that prioritises comparative analysis and a process of 'distancing' from the data that, in my view, is facilitated by the use of archived data.

Much of the debate surrounding the archiving of qualitative data has centred on the question of whether or not 'secondary' analysis is really possi-

ble, given that the context provided by 'being there' cannot be fully recorded or reproduced. However, as Hammersley (2010) and Irwin and Winterton (2012) have argued, the issue is not really one of 'primary' versus 'secondary' data, but of how researchers construe the movement between 'data' and 'evidence.' As the 'digital revolution' (Corti and Fielding 2016) creates new opportunities for 'symphonic' forms of data analysis (Halford and Savage 2017), the distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' data may become increasingly obsolete. Researchers may feel more confident about creating evidence by 'filling in' the gaps by drawing on diverse data sources – similarly to the craft of the historian (Fielding 2004). Nevertheless, the process of archiving will continue to play a vital role in distinguishing purposively collected qualitative social science data, in providing the documentation that allows us to fill in the gaps in rigorous and reliable ways, and to develop new theoretical understandings of social change by reading history 'against the grain'.

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