Life-history interviews – on using a time line

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Prelude – the story of this paper

My first encounter with life history research was during my Ph.D. research. This concerned a multi-method study of nomadic mobility in Senegal. One method stood out as yielding the most interesting and in-depth data: life story interviews using a time line. I made interviews with the head of the nomadic households and during these I came to understand the use of mobility in a complex context of continuity and change, identity and belonging in the Fulani community.

Time line interviews became one of my favourite tool in the years to follow, a tool used both for my research in various settings across cultures and disciplines and for my work as a management consultant. Naturally, I would include the tool for my students in educational psychology when I began teaching a course on qualitative interviews last semester.

Large was my surprise when I failed to find any references to the specific time line tool. I wondered where I had first read about this type of interview and looked through my old books on development research. While I was sure the inspiration came from Britha Mikkelsen's Methods for Development Work and Research, I did not succeed in finding to find any instruction to the use of a time line for making life story interviews. I decided that the lack of authoritative literature should not omit me from teaching my students how to make a time line interview. After an introduction, they had to use the tool for making an interview each other concerning their learning journey to DPU. The results were quite powerful. They made really in-depth interviews with each other, experiencing how an interview can be a co-construction, as they had read in Steinar Kvale's InterViews. Afterwards, many chose to use the tool for their exam. This was a 'reflection essay' written after they had conducted an interview. Some of these essays held beautiful reflections over the analytical power at play in a time line interview. Unfortunately, the students could not refer to any literature related directly to the method. Reading these I decided it was about time I wrote a paper on the use of a time line in qualitative interviews.

[1] Please note that a later version of this paper has been published as Adriansen, H. K. (2012). Timeline interviews: A tool for conducting life history research. *Qualitative studies*, *3*(1), 40-55.

Introduction to life history research

Time line or life line[2] interviews can be used for a number of different purposes. In this paper, however, I will focus on the use of time line interviews for life history research. The paper is written against the backdrop that there is a gap in the literature on 'how to' do time line interviews. Many researchers write that they have used a time line, but there is very little explanation of what this entails. Hence, the purpose of this paper is the fill this gap by describing how to conduct a time line interview and analyse the implications of this tool for the outcome of the interview.

Life history research[3] has had a long history going 'in and out of fashion' since Thomas and Znaniecki published their *The Polish peasant in Europe and America* some 90 years ago (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918-20). In particular in sociology, life story interview has been taught as a method for capturing people's own perceptions of their lives (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). In development studies and human geography, which is my background, life history research is linked to 'oral history' projects aiming to explore the culture and history of certain places through the memories and recollections of its people – in their language, using their vocabulary (e.g. Cross and Barker, 1994). Especially, people's perceptions of change have been subject to study by human geographers and anthropologist alike. This was my entry into the field. By making life story interviews with Fulani nomads, I gained insights I did not gain by using my other methods – structured interviews, questionnaires, observations.[4] I came to understand the life world of the interviewee in a new way. A life world that was so different from my own that I assumed the power of the method was related to these differences. Little did I know that the method was equally useful for studying people leading lives very similar to my own.

Some life history researchers are predominantly interested in the way stories are told and less interested in the relationship between the story and the lived life. When we focus on the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, the way we are telling the story is very important – what is told and what is not being told (Goodson , 2010). In this case, it becomes very important for the interviewer to be silent, not to take over the interview with too many questions or a set frame for asking questions. When, on the other hand, the lived life also becomes important, when we want to related a person's life story to his/hers actions, then

[2] In the literature both time line and life lines are mentioned. I see time lines as an overarching concept including life lines. Subsequently, I use the concept time line in this paper.

[3] I use Goodson and Sikes' (2001) distinction between life story and life history. A life story is concerned with understanding a person's view and account of their life, the story they tell about their life (2001: 87). In life history research, the intention is to understand how the patterns of different life stories can be related to their wider historical, social and political context.

[4] My Ph.D. project concerned the mobility patterns of Fulani nomads in Senegal. I used a wide range of methods and data sources from GPS and satellite imagery, over questionnaires, to qualitative interview (including timeline interviews) and participatory observations. Fieldwork was conducted on several occasions from 1997 to 2000. Eight timeline interviews were made lasting about two hours each. An interpreter was used for translating from the local language, Pulaar, into French. As the nomads were illiterate, they did not participate in writing on the timeline (Adriansen, 2002; 2003).

'facts'[5] become important. It is not only how the story is told, which is relevant, it is also how to story relates to what has happened in the interviewee's life and how the person has reacted towards it. Hence, both the story and the lived life become important. Time line interviews as described below are more appropriate for those researchers who share an interest in the lived lives of the interviewees, those who are also interested in the 'facts'.

One of the strengths of life story interviews is the strong emphasis on holism. Lives are seen as whole, the public and private cannot be separated, and lives are contextual and should be studied and understood this way (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). By using a time line method, we increase our chances of seeing events and perceptions of these events in context with the wider life experiences – as I will argue below. The use of a time line should not, however, be seen as an assumption of linearity of a chronological timeline. It is merely a tool for untangling the story and for engaging the interviewee in constructing this story. Often when people tell their story, it is nice and linear, rational and coherent – it becomes 'one' life. But we live many lives and by using the time line method explained below, we can make room for these different lives, for the different stories and their context. Goodson and Sikes (2001) have mentioned the use of time lines as a useful start for life history research, for instance by inviting the interviewee to construct a time line of key events. My approach to the use of time lines is somewhat different. When conducting a time line interview (as elaborated below), the construction of events along the time line is the basis for the whole interview. Hence, it is not mere a tool for starting an interview and the construction of the time line is a collaborative effort shared by the interviewer and the interviewee. As interviewer I want to take part in the story telling about key events as this constitutes an important aspect of the story itself. However, I do not consider the time line interview to be the sole source of information for life history research. But it is a useful tool collecting and constructing information for life stories.

Consequently, the aim of this paper is to describe and analyse a tool for conducting life story interviews: the time line interview. The intention is that readers should leave with a level of understanding that enables them analyse if a time line interview is an appropriate tool for their research and if so, feel sufficiently confident to conduct their own time line interviews. In order to do so, the remainder of the paper is organised as follows: First the tool is carefully described. Then two important aspects of the tool are analysed, namely ownership and the analytical power of the researcher. Subsequently, strengths and weaknesses of time line interviews are discussed. The following section is a brief discussion of the use of time line interviews outside life history research. Finally there is a discussion and some concluding remarks. As the paper is based on my own experiences with this method, there are examples from my research illustrating the practical implications of doing time line interviews.

How to conduct a time line interview

[5] I use the word 'facts' for lack of a better word and use inverted commas to account for our different understandings of the word fact depending on out ontological and epistemological stances.

The tool it-self is not complicated to handle, but as other interview techniques, it takes time to master. The basic ingredients are a large piece of paper and a number of coloured pens. The interview may be taped (and transcribed); it depends on the type of analysis intended and on how the use of a tape recorder may affect the interview. The use of tape recorder for qualitative interviews is an issue in itself, which I will not address further in this paper (see e.g. Kvale, 1996).

The backbone of the method is the drawing of a time line in the middle of the paper, usually horizontally. The chronological ordering of events is the guiding principle of the interview. The time line begins with the year where the life story begins, in the case of the nomads from Senegal this was with their year of birth. It could also be when the interviewee's parents met or any other significant event prior to the birth of the interviewee. Usually, the time line ends with the year of the interview – it is the end of the story so far. However, it could also continue into the future if the interviewee finds this relevant for the story.

Depending on what type of life story we want the interviewee to tell, the interviewer can open with different questions. When interviewing the nomads, I asked about the important events in life. These turned out to be when they received their first animals (as kids 5-7 years old), when they married, had children, were divorced and so forth. I marked these events with different colours along the time line (see figure 1). By first asking about important events, we can take time to explore when and how these events unfold, how and if they are related and affect each other. By drawing the line in the middle of the paper, there is a physical layout which permits different perspectives; these may be the 'core' of the story, e.g. the home/family/private on one side of the line and work/outside on the other side. Usually, the interviewee begins with the most important events, which we will note on one side of the time line and gradually "outside" events that have affected the events may come up as the story unfolds and be noted on the other side of the line. These outside events are kept on the other side of the line, but in the same chronological order and with arrows indicating where and when they have affected. When trying to place events in chronological order, the interviewee sometimes realise that these events took place in a different order from what the person initially remembered. This may mean that they de- and re-construct their story; they see different patterns of cause and effect. In this way, the paper and the drawings along the time line become important visual tools for seeing *how* the story is told. It is also used for attending to the tensions and contradictions in the story as these become more apparent when they story is laid out on the paper in front of the interviewer as well as the interviewee.

The paper is usually split into two by the line in the middle, but it can be divided into three or four parallel sections thereby leaving room for different stories to be constructed along each other. Or the different sections can be used for different contexts – the local, the national, the socio-political or the environmental – depending on what is important for understanding the story/stories. Thereby there is an emphasis on context. According to Callewaert (2007), context should always be thought of in life history research – also when the interviewee does not touch upon it him-/herself. By leaving room on the paper for context, the interviewer is prompted to focus on context in the interview – or afterwards. The interviewer can also

choose to add information about social or political events along the time line in the subsequent analysis. However, the interviewer should remember to add this information with another colour/in another part of the paper thereby indicating clearly which part of the paper is the life story and which part is used for the analysis. Some may find this emphasis on context premature in the life story interview and prefer to leave it to the analysis, to the life *history* research. I prefer, however, to include the interviewee in understanding his/her life in context. In this way, the analysis may begin in the interview situation. This is not new, though, as Goodson and Sikes (2001) also have noted that life history research is iterative and that the analysis of an interview already begins in the interview situation.

The interviewee can participate in writing and drawing. After the interviewer has explained the purpose of the interview and the process, he/she can encourage the interviewee to take part in writing and drawing on the paper. In this way, the interview becomes a 'co-construction' which many qualitative interviews are, as Kvale (1996) has explained. The paper serves as a 'collective memory' where the story can be seen both by the interviewer and the interviewee. It is easy for both parties to return to an issue already discussed and this can be linked with other events along the way. Whether the interviewee is participating in writing or not she/he is usually engaged in following how the story enfolds on the paper. This is quite different from an interview where the interviewer writes notes on a piece of paper that the interviewee cannot see. Using the paper as a collective memory makes the interview itself a collective process allowing the interviewee to take ownership to the process.

In my (and my students') experience, this type of interview takes time. It is by nature very explorative which means that the end result is not known, the interesting issues may be quite different from the what you as interviewer expected, and the interviewee may be surprised to find unknown links between events. This is time consuming and I would warn against embarking on this type of interview if you have less than one hour at your disposal. Often approximately two hours have been appropriate for a time line interview. It is enough time for stories to emerge and 'materialise', yet it is usually not so long that the interviewer or the interviewee get too exhausted. It varies, of course, what constitutes appropriate time and the interviewer should always pay attention to the interviewees' conditions both physical (being tired or hungry) and emotional (delicate matters can be brought up). Perhaps move together with ethical issues

The benefits of the method related to ownership and to analytical power. These issues will be elaborated in the next section.

Learning journey interviews

The time line interview can be used for capturing learning journeys. A learning journey is the learning process experienced during time. In principle, the journey can be any course or learning process at school or elsewhere. For the learning journey interview to work, the interviewee has to be able to reflect over the events and able to relate to learning aspects. I have used learning journey interviews for a project concerning creativity in higher education. I interviewed former Master students on their learning journey during their two year

programme in leadership and innovation (Adriansen, 2010). Also, my master students have also used learning journey interviews to analyse the outcome of continuing education courses, in particular leadership courses – both in-house and external, open courses.

One student, Marcelo, decided to make the time line vertical instead ofhorizontal. This small change gave raise to some other interesting changes in the co-construction of the learning journey: The bottom of the line, i.e. the beginning of the story, changed from being a line to being a number of intertwined lines – roots of a tree. The simple chance in the drawing of the time line cause a slightly more complicated story to be told – a story where different events, different roots led to events along the main story line, the tree trunk. Likewise some of the interviewees saw different perspectives for the future, i.e. different lines emerging from the trunk like the crown of a tree. These interviews were made with a group of people who had finished a leadership training course based on 'Theory U' (Scharmer, 2007), a course with a spiritual orientation focusing very much on emergence, presence, and 'leading from the future' (Scharmer, 2007). These interviewees were highly educated academics, who were very reflective and capable of expressing themselves. They took part in developing the interview method. From the outset, Marcelo had been concerned to use an interview method that was appropriate for capturing the learning process that interviewees had experienced during the course. Marcelo found that the explorative character of the time line method made it particularly useful for his purpose.

Analysing the interviews

The timeline interview is an interview technique or a tool for making interviews; hence there is not a certain type of analysis pertaining to timeline interviews. On the contrary, one should adapt the way the timeline interview is conducted to the type of analysis wanted. For instance Marcelo, mentioned above, adapted the learning journey interview to the poststructuralist stance he used in his Master thesis.

In my own research, I have used timeline interviews in different ways; however, they have never been my sole data source. In my Ph.D., I combined a number of different types of data derived from both qualitative and quantitative methods (Adriansen, 2008; Madsen and Adriansen, 2004). Usually, I make timeline interviews as part of a field study and therefore I also have observations and other types of data which can be used in combination with the interviews. How the interviews are analysed, how they are combined with other types of data, and how they are validated depends on the purpose of the study.

Ownership and analytical power

There are two important and intertwined points, which I consider benefits of the time line interview method. These concern ownership and analytical power.

The time line interview often causes the interviewee to take ownership to the interview process and entails that the analytical power is distributed in the sense that the interviewee has a share in the analytical power. It is the *interview situation* that makes this possible – what

takes place before and after a time line interview is not different from other qualitative interviews. The large paper allows both the interviewer and the interviewee to 'report'. Hence, the interviewee can take ownership by drawing and writing, by participating in the reporting. The fact that the interviewer shares the large piece of paper with the interviewee instead of making notes on a 'private' piece of paper or in a note book means that the interviewee can see what is being noted and the paper thus becomes a collective memory. Sharing the notes, the memory with the interviewee will most likely give him/her ownership to interview. He/she has the possibility to steer the interview in a certain direction, although it is still the interviewer who ultimately holds the analytical power and thereby is the one who can decide which issues are relevant for the interview.

The concept 'analytical power of the researcher' stems from Rose (1997). She explains that the researcher holds a privileged position by deciding who is a relevant interviewee, by formulating the questions asked and when they are asked, by directing the flow of the discourse, and by having the final power of interpretation. This is the analytical power of the researcher and it should not be neglected. Rose further links the analytical power of the researcher to the issue of distance. Even though the researcher and the researched may be placed in the same landscape of power, there is still a distance between them because of the analytical power of the researcher.

In 'conventional' interviews, the interviewer holds the analytical power. It is the interviewer who decides that the interviewee is a relevant person to talk to; it is the interviewer who constructs the interview guide; it is the interviewer who asks the questions. When conducting a time line interview, it is still the interviewer who decides that the interviewee is a relevant person to talk to and likewise it is the interviewer who decides that a time-line interview is appropriate for the interview. So far the analytical power is held by the interviewer. When the time line interview starts, however, the situation is different from a 'conventional' interview because the interviewee is invited to participate in 'constructing the story'. The questions are not prepared beforehand. The key events are articulated by the interviewee and he/she can participate in linking them by writing and drawing on the paper with the time line. In this way, the analytical power is shared (although not equally) in the interview situation. But prior to and after the interview itself, it is still the interviewer who holds the analytical power. The time line interview with its use of props allows the interviewer and the interviewee to be situated closer in the landscape of power – to use the vocabulary of Rose (1997).

In case of the Senegalese nomads the interviewees were illiterate and did therefore not participate in the reporting. Nevertheless they found the whole setup with the large piece of paper and the coloured pens entertaining. The fact that they could follow what was going on – rather than me writing in my notebook out of their sight – was no doubt useful in establishing a trustful atmosphere.

Strengths and weaknesses of the time line interview method

As any other method, the timeline interview has its strengths and weaknesses – and sometimes strength can also be a weakness.

Two strengths of the method are the ordering of the interview along a time line and the use of props, i.e. paper and pens which can be used by both interviewer and interviewee. By using a time line, we increase our chances of seeing events and perceptions of these events in context with the wider life experiences. The use of a time line, however, could be seen as an assumption of linearity of a chronological timeline. This is not the intention. The time line is merely a tool for untangling the story and for engaging the interviewee in constructing this story. When people tell their story, it is often coherent, rational and linear. However, when trying to place events in chronological order, the interviewee sometimes realise that these events took place in a different order from what the person initially remembered. This may mean that they de- and re-construct their story; they see different patterns of cause and effect. In this way, the paper and the drawings along the time line become important visual tools for seeing *how* the story is told. It is also used for attending to the tensions and contradictions in the story as these become more apparent when they story is laid out on the paper in front of the interviewer as well as the interviewee. By using the paper, we can make room for different lives, for the different stories and their context.

Due to two aspects (strengths) mentioned above – sharing of ownership and analytical power – the method may not be the most applicable for interviewing elites. When conducting interviews with powerful people high in the social hierarchy it may be useful to balance their power by maintaining one's analytical power. In Adriansen and Madsen (2009), we have described how an interviewee started negotiating or challenging the interviewer's analytical power. In this situation, a time line interview may have been even more difficult to conduct.

Time line interviews may be more difficult to conduct with insiders. Being an insider is not unusual within educational research (see e.g. Sikes and Potts, 2008). According to Adriansen and Madsen (2009), there are both advantages and disadvantages when conducting research on the inside. Being an insider in relation to one's interviewees gives the advantage of having a shared history and a close knowledge of the context. The disadvantages concern power relations, positionality and presupposed shared understanding. Positionality, in particular, is negotiated – overtly or silently. The roles can become blurred when ownership and analytical power is shared in the interview situation, as is the case in time line interviews. In a study of the construction of knowledge in research communities (Madsen and Adriansen, 2006), we made qualitative interviews with our colleagues, but decided not to use timelines, paper or propsartefacts as we wanted to keep our position as researchers. This was already difficult when interviewing our colleagues, some of whom negotiated and challenged our analytical power.

As in other qualitative interviews, ethics are important in time line interviews. What may happen – possibly due to the interviewee's feeling of ownership – is that the interview becomes very personal. When my students were trying out the method with each other, some of them came back to class quite emotional having shared deep feelings and new understandings of their lives. Even though the students were newcomers to the field of

interviewing who had less than an hour for the interview they managed to create an atmosphere of trust and confidence.

While some researchers (e.g. Goodson and Sikes, 2001) recommend that the interviewer keep eye contact with the interviewee, I find that what constitutes appropriate eye contact is very cultural specific. Having conducted fieldwork and interviews in diverse cultural settings from rural Senegal over bureaucracies in the Middle East to academia in Denmark, I am used to pay attention to these differences. While eye contact can create an intimate atmosphere, it can also be intimidating. In my experience, it is sometimes easier to talk about personal issues when there is no eye contact, but an atmosphere of presence for instance because both the interviewee and the interviewer are engaged in the same activity. This could be the construction of the time line. This is similar to the atmosphere that we may experience when we are doing the dishes together and can have a confidential conversation without eye contact, or when two people are taking a walk together.

When conducting time line interviews, the interviewer has to be aware that the interview can become very personal and intimate. As Goodson and Sikes (2001) have mentioned, the interviewer should manage to exercise cause, be emotionally sensitive and intelligent. The interviewer is responsible for stopping or diverting the interview, if the interviewee is approaching issues that are too sensible. Of course this can be very difficult to judge. But be being aware of the method's 'inherent ability' to get people to open up, I hope that the interviewer can behave ethically 'correct'.

Time line interviews – the use of the method outside life history research

Two aspects of the method makes it useful outside life history research – one is the aspect of time or chronology, the other is the use of props, of sharing a large piece of paper for reporting the interview.

Using a time line to guide one's interview can naturally be applied outside life history research. However, it only makes sense if time or chronology is important for the issue at hand. In my experience time is central more often that we realise. I have used the method for evaluating a development project at a department at a Danish university. I was employed as a management consultant and in charge of the evaluation. It was clear that the project did not proceed as planned due to financial problems at the university at large and due to mergers within the faculty. An evaluation that did not take all these changes into account would show the project had failed. By using the time line method, however, a more complex story unfolded. I made the interview with a group of five and used paper from a flip-over. We were all sitting and standing around the paper and took turns in writing while trying to unfold what had happened to the development project (on one side of the time line) in relation to the events at faculty and university level. The group discussed how these outside events had affected the project and during the interview their view of the project changed. From the outset, they felt that it

had been a failure as they had not reached their milestones and targets. During the interview process, however, they came to a different understanding: the project had helped them navigate in a very turbulent period at the department. The project meetings had given them a place and a focus for something positive and productive, while the events at faculty and university level rendered them passive, negative and unproductive. In my understanding, using the time line made them see the project in context with 'outside' events and to see these events in relation to each other over time. The group discussed and corrected each other until a shared understanding of the story and its chronology was constructed. Hence, the time line in itself with the possibility to connect 'different worlds' was useful. A second important aspect was the use of the collective memory, the piece of paper where the participants took turns in writing and understanding the story. I found that this made them work towards an understanding themselves rather than I should 'lure' information out of them.

The use of props – in this case sharing a large price of paper for reporting the interview – can be useful for qualitative interviews. Having something to look at jointly, especially creating it together, often gives the interviewee ownership to the process. A time line interview is only relevant when the issue at hand is somehow related to time, for instance show some sort of development over time. When interviews are not related to time, the idea of using props for the interview can still come into practice. One may consider reporting the interview as a mind map which the interviewee can co-create. I have not tried this myself, yet, but can imagine that a mind map can give ownership and share the analytical power – if the interviewee feels safe with this type of process.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The aim of this paper has been to explain and discuss time line interviews as a method for doing life history research. My motivation for writing the paper was twofold: I wanted to share my positive experiences with this type of interview and I aimed at filling the gap in the existing literature.

One of the pertinent issues when doing life history research is that people often want to make sense of the lives. To use the words of Søren Kierkegaard "life is lived forward, but understood backward". This means that some interviewees may be very eager to make sense of events, to tell a nice, coherent story. Some researchers have criticised life history research exactly because life stories can become too neat and linear, full of purpose and meaning (see several examples of this critique in Petersen *et al*., 2007). For me, the problem is not life story interviews, but the way they may be used. We should acknowledge the strengths and limitations of the life story interview. It is an actor oriented perspective. It is a personal story, we are interested in *how* the story is told, the type of events the interviewee picks and the way the interviewee makes sense of these events. However, the life story in itself may not tell us (enough) about the wider social, political, and environmental context (Steensen, 2007). Therefore, it can be wise to supplement life story interviews with other types of research.

When it comes to making qualified life story interviews, I find that the time line method can be a useful tool. The method allows the interviewee to participate in the reporting of the interview which give raise to ownership and sharing of the analytical power. Exactly for this reason, it may not the most appropriate method for interviewing elites or for conducting insider interviews where positionality can be at play. The use of the time line should not lead the interviewer or the interviewee to assume linearity and coherence; it is an organising principle for the events. It provides an opportunity for linking the story with the wider social, political and environmental context during the interview. While the method is very suitable for life story research, it can also be used for other types of studies where interviews are made. I hope that readers will feel sufficiently equipped to embark on time line interviews after reading this.

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Figure 1. Example of reporting of a time line interview with a Senegalese nomad

The interview was made for my Ph.D. The interview was made in French. As the interviewee was illiterate, he did not participate in the reporting and therefore I wrote my notes in Danish as this was easier for me than French