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The problem of researching memoryware: using Time Lines in group contexts

In my exploration of the sociology of generations I adopted Mannheim's *Problem of Generations* (1952) as a key theoretical framework, and the major theoretical intervention which established the problem of generation as a socio-historical phenomenon which locates generations as entities with the potential for agency, located in a socio-historically specific and thus contingent social situation with shaping, if not structural, properties (Wolff et al. 1993). As such, Mannheim argued generations to be a proper object of consideration for Sociology, arguing that the crucial moment of actualisation, i.e. obtaining agency and taking flight, rested upon the relational system's ability to develop social understandings which can form the basis of critical social knowledge, enabling critical social action to take place. This capacity to reconsider the micro-macro interaction in such a dynamic way leads Pilcher (1994) to suggest that Mannheim's work is an undervalued legacy in contemporary sociology.

However, once embarked upon an empirical exploration, I began to think that the problem with which I was faced was as much the problem of *researching* generations, as the problem of generations *itself*. For me, Mannheim's framework suggests a twin research strategy, exploring both the social situation which the generation entered, i.e. its experience of structure as a regime providing certain constraints and opportunities, and secondly, the subjective experience or even group identification process which Mannheim argues arises as in part a function of an awareness ('consciousness') of that shared location in the historical and social stream.

This paper explores the second area, concentrating on the problem of researching consciousness, and particularly the concept of 'the past' i.e. a collective or even generational history, presented as 'memory'.

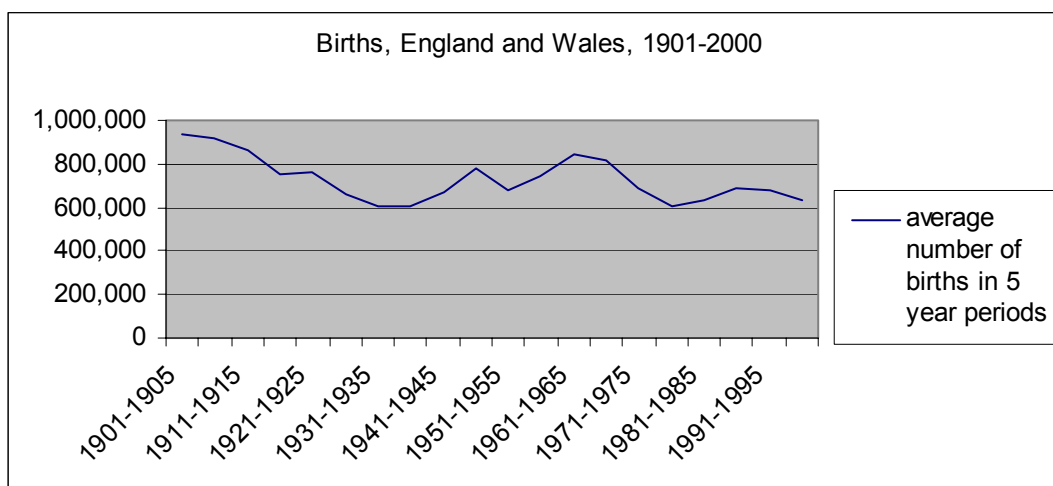
The paper begins by considering the problem of researching generational memory. Next I will consider the use of Time Lines, (adapted from Weisbord et al. 1992, and Weisbord and Janoff 1995), and briefly report its findings,

before concluding that a new concept of memory may be needed when working with cohort specific narratives, for which I suggest the concept of memoryware.

The problem of generations, or the problem of researching generations?

In researching the sociology of generations, I made a small case study of Thirtysomething. My sample consisted of those who were in their thirties, and thus may/not be said to have been Thirtysomething at that point in their lifecourse. This group can be broadly defined by its birth dates as the second peak of the boomer population in Britain, and the focus groups contained these plus those who came to settle in Britain during the cohort's life time. Figure 1.1 shows the volume of births in England and Wales 1901-2000. The British baby boom can be seen to start at the close of the Second World War, and to have two peaks, a first, sharp peak between 1950-1955, and a second, broader curve between 1960-1970. This research was concerned largely with the second peak, who had moved into their thirties at the time in which I conducted the empirical study in 2000, with its upper end just approaching forty.

Figure 1.1 Births: England and Wales, 1901-2000



Source: Office of National Statistics, dataset PBH11 (www.statistics.gov.uk)

It is notable that the exact distribution of births across Europe and America while carrying a similar pattern of a baby boom in general, shows diversity between different states. In America, it is the *first* peak which is the most numerous and enduring. This is significant in so far as it is this peak which

has obtained the cultural name of 'the Boomers', (and sometimes specifically has borrowed the French tag, the 68ers, in reference to the student movements and anti-Vietnam war protest etc). Since each youth cohort enters the social situation at different moments, their reference points, (according to the rubric of generation theory) are assumed to differ. Thus, some of the concepts and experiences which are commonly assumed to be 'Boomer-ish' in fact increasingly don't apply the further away in time we travel forwards through the subsequent births of the second peak.

In part, generation theory itself provides some explanation of this, with its insistence on the primacy of the formative experience of entering 'society' as youth. The youthful moment is argued to produce a long lasting impression, and is used for identity purposes throughout life, however, the literature is disagreed on whether the beliefs and values which are taken through life are themselves long-lasting, (Mannheim 1952; Edmunds and Turner, 2002a; 2002b). My research explored this aspect by considering the 'prehistory' of Thirtysomething experience, and thus the processes of generational formation and identification (if any) under what is now historical circumstances of social situations which have 'passed'. Inevitably, I came up against one of the great, recurring themes in the area of generation studies, (and arguably in lifecourse and life history methodology), that of attempting to research memory and in Mannheim's (1952) terms, generational consciousness.

The binding power of time remembered

Mannheim (1952) argues that generations can only participate in a temporally limited section of the historical process. They share a location, which creates opportunity for social (and generational) consciousness. However, they may not produce identical analyses and responses to the social situation which they encounter, since these are subject to social processes and as such can become stratified. 'Members of a generation are 'similarly located'...in so far as they all are exposed to the same phase of the collective process...[and that] such experience impinges upon a similarly 'stratified' consciousness' (ibid: 297). This is in keeping with the major principle of Mannheim's *Sociology of Knowledge* (1952) that members of groups can only develop awareness and knowledge which is necessarily, (by which he means

integrally), perspectival. This arises not so much from the social fact of chronological contemporaneity, but from the actors' encounter with the social situation. A pre-requisite for the emergence of social knowledge was that actors must become aware of their social contexts in relation to themselves (Kettler, Meja, & Stehr, 1984). Evidence of generational activity depends on any evidence '...that a given historical experience has in fact become a central point of reference for the cohort that went through it,' (ibid: 56). As such, the encounter with the historical present becomes narrativised as the space of experience (Ricoeur 1988).

Ricoeur (ibid) borrows the concept of the space of experience from the philosopher Reinhart Koselleck. The space of experience is not the same as 'the persistence of the past in the present,' (Ricoeur 1988:208), but '...is the present past [*Gegenwärtige Vergangenheit*] whose events have been incorporated [*einverleibt*] and can be remembered,' (Koselleck 1985:272, cited in Ricoeur, 1988:324). This incorporation makes social understanding perspectival, since actors work with a specific biography of the present past. Thus, the space of experience explored here is that presented in narratives of memory which are a particular kind of past – the past as it appears relevant to the present. Thus the past has an element of contingency and its formulation might be changeable.

These views of memory as phenomenological and interactive leads us to see the basis of selection as not only providing the context but also the rationale of the ways in which memory becomes narrativised, (Radstone 2000). As Thelen argues, the interesting thing about memories is not whether or not they are 'true' or accurate as such, but 'why historical actors constructed their memories in a particular way at a particular time,' (1989, cited Middleton & Edwards, 1990). For Mannheim (1952) and Ricoeur (1988), the fact that they may do so leads to action informed by such acts, and is evidence of a stream of consciousness shaped by its temporal moment. Studies of generational memory such as Schuman and Scott (1989) and Scott and Zak (1992) have demonstrated this process in action, showing how narratives of history define reference points around which a consensus develops over cohorts as to the relative significance of key historical events (see Appendix 1). Thus, such

memory acts suggest a source of the 'evidence' needed to indicate shared, collective experience, possibly used by actors as a marker of identification. Mannheim (1952) understands memory to be a core factor in generational formation, distinguishing between appropriated memories and personally acquired memories, assuming that the latter is the genuine artefact of directly lived experience, and as such is the only sort 'which really sticks and it alone has real binding power,' (ibid :296).

This binding power is experienced across time i.e. it becomes a continuous resource used to make sense of the present situation. This sense of the past as a resource is adjacent to Ricoeur's, although may be rather more fixed in its constitutive parts. The Mannheimian past is an impress or a stain which can never be rubbed out. Ricoeur's past is more contingent, and prone to adjustments depending on the demands of the present. However, both share a view of the remembered past as a crucial narration of identity and a particular mechanism by which individuals and communities develop historically conditioned social knowledge, and are turned to face the present-future, which for Ricoeur is conceptualised as the horizon of expectations, (Ricoeur 1988).

Using Time Lines to explore the cohort specificity of memory

A core problematic in discussions of consciousness is that of securing evidence of its existence, (allowing for its status as 'tentative', Glenn 1977). Even if it does exist, we may never know if data actually can truly be said to directly and unproblematically correspond to, or represent, consciousness. Even if it did, equally we cannot know unproblematically whether consciousness has itself been acted upon. The view taken by Ricoeur, for example, is that temporal awareness itself cannot be spoken *per se*, 'but requires the mediation of the indirect discourse of narration' (1988:241). This problem is addressed by Pilcher (1998) in her study of inter-generational relationships, who concluded that the words spoken by actors are in the end a source of evidence of consciousness in the empirical world, to which there may be limited correspondence. I have built on this to share the position of Ricoeur, whose view 'amounts to taking narrative as the guardian of time, insofar as there can be no thought about time without narrated time,'

(1988:241), i.e. that we think about time through narratives which attribute and define its social meaning.

A further complication is my role of researcher in prompting and gathering up such words, which combined with the selection and editing process creates a partial and inarticulate narrative of the actors' partial and inarticulate narrative. Pitfalls include the risk of producing narratives which run counter to the self-understandings of the researched, (Dembour 2000). The status of narrated times found in research can be understood as that of an aporia, not unlike novels or diaries, (Ricoeur, 1988), in which consciousness becomes viewed through the refracted lens of the multiple flows of narratives of consciousness.

The choice of focus groups

The intersubjective and collective nature of generations, and the need to access the collective processes action led me towards the choice of focus groups, which according to Templeton '...is a small, temporary community, formed for the purpose of collaborative enterprise of discovery', (1985:5). Bloor *et al.* suggests that a specific benefit is the group's ability to generate understandings, (a core generational activity according to Mannheim's (1952) formulation) since 'The group is a socially legitimated occasion for participants to engage in 'retrospective introspection' to attempt collectively to tease out previously taken for granted assumptions,' (2001: 5/6). Bryman meanwhile, points to the history of focus groups, identifying characteristics of both the Focused Interview (Merton *et al.* 1956) and the group interview '...the focus group method appends to the focused interview the element of interaction within groups as an area of interest and is more focused than the group interview,' (2001: 336). Furthermore, Calder sees focus groups as providing a good process for theory work, suggesting that they are '... a way of accomplishing the construct-generation process', (1977: 356).

The Time Line exercise

I decided to set up a focus group exercise as part of the focus group process, using a Time Line method. The Time Line exercise was adapted from Weisbord and Janoff's (1995) inclusive style of community consultation work

developed in the contexts of urban regeneration policy work in the USA¹, which encourages and enables communities to share diverse and sometimes conflicting accounts of the past. The Time Lines exercise is particularly appropriate to use with a focus group since according to Weisbord et al. (1992) it is collaboratively carried out by small groups which are self managing, allows for difference to emerge and interaction to take a relatively uncontrolled course.

Participants are invited to work in groups, marking up a prepared sheet with events which they in retrospect consider to have been significant. An example of a Time Line can be found in Appendix 2.

The upper half of the chart was reserved for 'public' events, which groups took to mean social, media, historical, political and economic and so on. The bottom half of the chart was reserved for 'personal' which the groups universally took to mean a mixture of everyday, personal, and individual or family-household events.

I felt that this method could be adapted for this project, since it encourages people to map their own biography events against wider social events, in other words to situate their life history in wider history without defining the task in such abstract terms. This was a useful departure point since I could then prompt the group to explore these connections further in the focus group discussion which followed.

I felt that the Time Line could function both to ignite flashbulb memories, (Brown and Kulik 1977), and to locate individuals within the group's historical contexts, as I searched for Mannheim's significant historical shaping moments, (Mannheim 1952), and evidence of generationally specific memory (Schuman and Scott 1989; Scott & Zac 1992), which might materialise in narrative (Ricoeur 1998).

The Time Line was useful for locating biography where actors invoke a social cartography of times, whereby they locate themselves into 'my time, (the lifecourse), 'our time' (the historical time of the collective of all contemporaries), and 'all time' (pre-existing and ever lasting time).

¹ . This work was also written up as a co-production with participants in *Discovering Common Ground* by Weisbord, Bennett and Koehler and 35 participant co-authors in 1992.

This innovative method was a good means of organising remembering and forgetting, and enabled participants some time to work out personal and collective stories. The Time Lines can be considered as a unique form of document of life, collectively produced in the context of a research situation. In terms of their direct representation or correspondence to memory or even generational memory in Mannheim's terms, I take Hareven's view of such texts, that their value lies in '...their contribution to an understanding of human experiences and social conditions,' (1978:143) rather than their 'accuracy' *per se*. Besides, what alternative might there be when oral history '...offers almost the only feasible route for the retrieval of perceptions and experiences of whole groups who did not normally leave a written record,' (ibid: 143).

The concept of memoryware

This paper has explored a particular form of memory in action, which could be argued to be a form of generational consciousness, (while recognising the difficulties of such a framework). In spite of the plethora of ways of seeing memory which currently abound, I suggest that none of them quite conceptualise generational memory *as a specific memory act of a community of time*. In order to reconsider what such a memory act may be or does, I will use the term memoryware.

The concept of memoryware is derived from an art and craft, possibly French in origin², in which domestic pottery would be smashed, and its shards re-assembled into a mosaic (Marshall, 1998). The meanings of each piece of pottery might be recounted as a form of story telling, rather like narratives told through patchwork in America. However, memoryware narrated in this way is open to constant retelling. The mosaic pieces can be arranged in an almost infinite variety of ways, so that edges abut and join differently each time, and once stuck down, could always be re-smashed and re-assembled, and new pieces might be added to it.

In this sense, there is a fluidity in memoryware which contrasts with its apparent fixedness of its physical form. This, plus the emphasis upon it as something which is put to use, means that the concept of memoryware can be

² Also known as *pique assiette*

applied to this study, and understood as a kind of 'social software', in this case, the software of a generation. Rather as with the internet, viewers may enter its molecular structure in infinitely different kinds of juxtapositions, and may navigate intuitively.

The Memoryware found in the Time Lines data

The memories of the focus groups captured in the Time lines can be thought of as a combination form of flashbulb memories, (Brown and Kullik 1977), dreams, fantasies, institutionalised memories, texts and a flow of historical awareness in the Mannheimian sense, which taken together constitute the memoryware which operate in the space of experience. I think that we can flesh out the idea of a generation or cohort entering a social situation, to view that situation as a series of scenes, of which in this data set, three major categories emerged:

- the scene of 'growing young' in boom, bust, boom
- the scene of 'Thatcherism' in particular, and a politicalscape in general
- the scene of 'working out the problem of going to work'

In looking at the three scenes raised by the focus groups, and the categories of data which underpin them, we can see a particular composition of these groups' memoryware as consisting of objects and of memorable times. Rather as Hoskins found in her fieldwork with the Kodi, I too '...could not collect the histories of the objects and the life histories of the persons separately,' (1998:2). The objects offered in this study ranged from personal belongings such as items of clothing and memorabilia, to public belongings, such as the grand projects of the time, (such as Concorde, motorways, service stations). The second category is the more conventional one of Mannheimian and general accounts of collective memories as 'the times' of the life.

What is particularly interesting in the focus group data is the nature of the times of the life which the generational actors choose to remember. Bartlett's exploration of memory led him to conclude that memory isn't a function of retrieving archives but of putting together a view of the past 'by means of a framework of shared understandings,' (1932:46). Middleton and Edwards (1990) suggest that people establish such consensuses around what is

notable and notorious, through discussions. Such discussions become cumulative (with adjustments), and form the basis of the next round of interpretation subsequently. Specifically identifying 'what earlier experience is carried forward in memory by a particular cohort,' (ibid: 360, emphasis added) enables us to understand behaviour and attitudes later in life, or as I am suggesting, the generation's memoryware. In this generation's case, my data suggests a certain 'stuckness' of actors in their reference points to Thatcherism, the north-south divide, cities, 'the youth' and so on. This raises the future research problem of how flexible and mobile generational memoryware actually is, i.e. is there a central core of reference points. This can be located back into the Mannheimian (1952) problem, where the encounter with 'society' is implicitly conceptualised as a staining process, which to some extent becomes a sort of inescapable 'fixture and fitting'.

Conclusions

In turning to the problem of generations, I found a challenging, rewarding task lay in translating the theoretical problem into something which can be researched in social life. In order to effect this, I took the two dimensions of the social system, regime, or structure which the generation entered as the social situation which required an analysis in its own right. This paper has not discussed this. The second dimension was the need to research that which Mannheim (1952) considered to be a generational consciousness. This can be broadly understood as having two time frames, 'the past' and 'present' which I found to be conceptualised in a very good way in terms of its possible utility for a generations project, in Ricoeur's conceptualisation of a space of experience and an horizon of expectation. This paper has considered how to research the space of experience, where this may be a shared, collective or even generational act, given the temporality of communities, and their confinement to live through a slice of time, when the social situation which they encounter can only be that historically contingent social situation of their own embodied present.

I found that focus groups as a methodology lent itself to a generational project, and in particular found that using a Time Line method as had been developed by Wiesbord (1992) and Weisbord and Janoff (1995) a very good method for enabling groups to work out collective narratives and to identify

some of Bartlett's 'shared understandings' (1932:46) and the consensus of the notable and notorious which collectives develop over time identified by Middleton and Edwards (1990). I suggest that we can understand these shared reference points as key identifiers of Mannheim's generational consciousness, and that we can take this one stage further by suggesting that memory acts carried out by communities of time may be specific kinds of acts, which work in specific ways. In the case of generations, I noted that memory and consciousness can be conceptualised as a form of what I termed 'memoryware', a system by which a community of time holds on to aspects of its past, (objects + memorable times), and builds up shared narratives, and develops a certain view of social understandings, which we can take as some evidence of the Mannheimian concept of social knowledge. Whereas Mannheim saw this as a font of critical and political action, my own exploration also reveals a more mundane aspect to memoryware, where actors paper the walls of their dwelling with these things from the past and gaze with collective delight upon their life and times.

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All comments welcome.

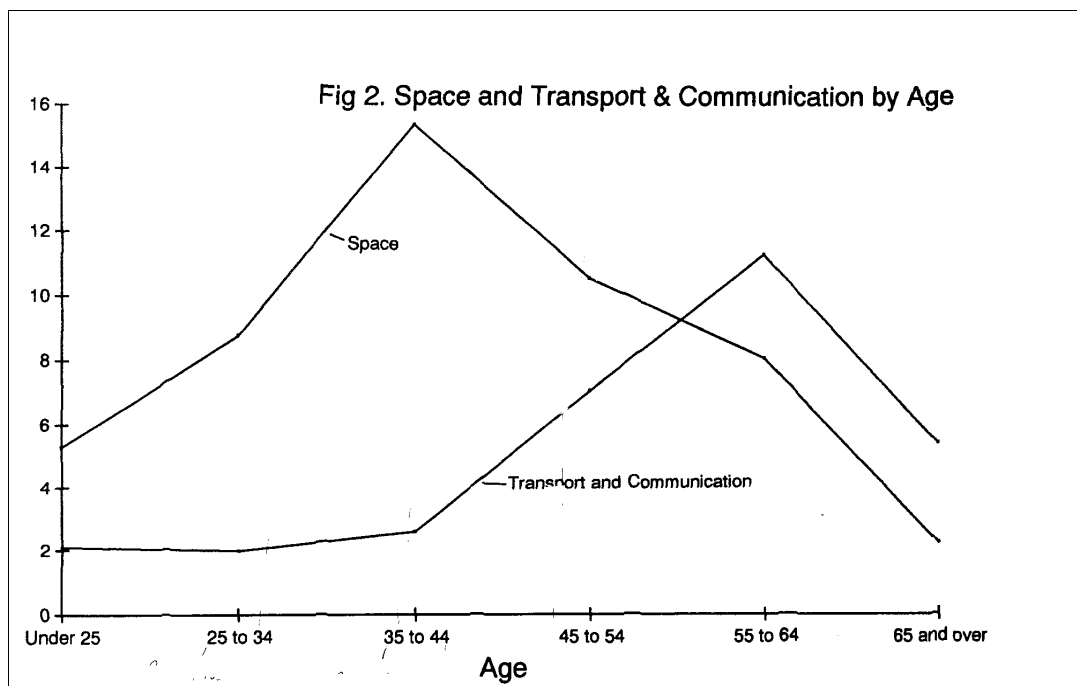
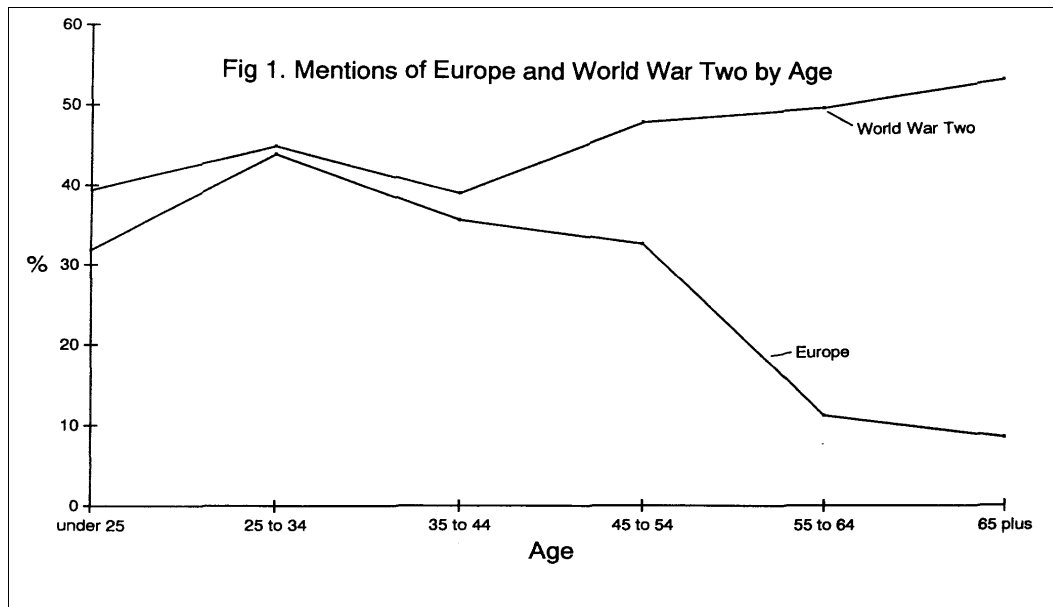
Appendix 1 Generational Memory: findings from Scott & Zac 1992, drawn from data obtained through British Household Panel Survey

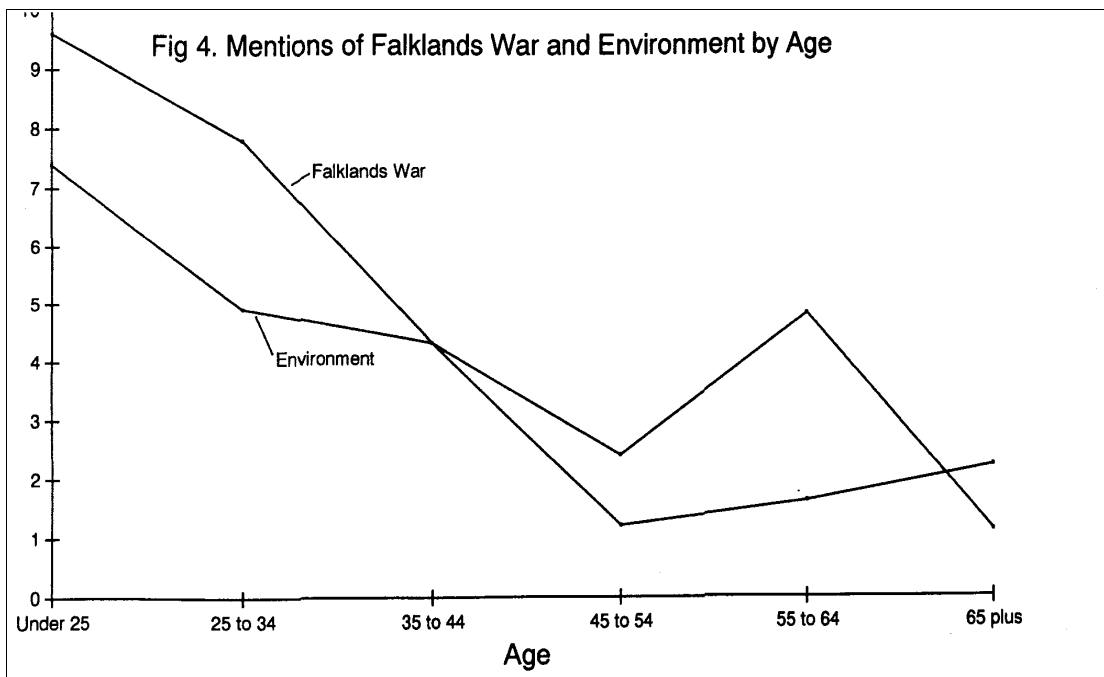
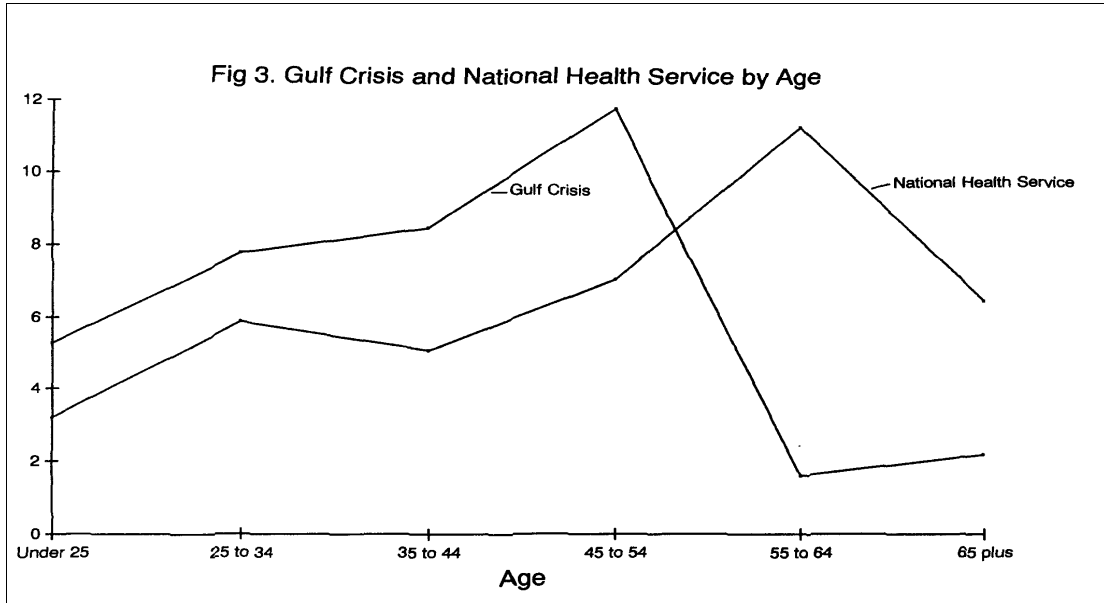
Fig 1 Mentions of Europe and World War II by Age

Fig 2 Space and Transport & Communication by Age

Fig 3 Gulf Crisis and National Health Service by Age

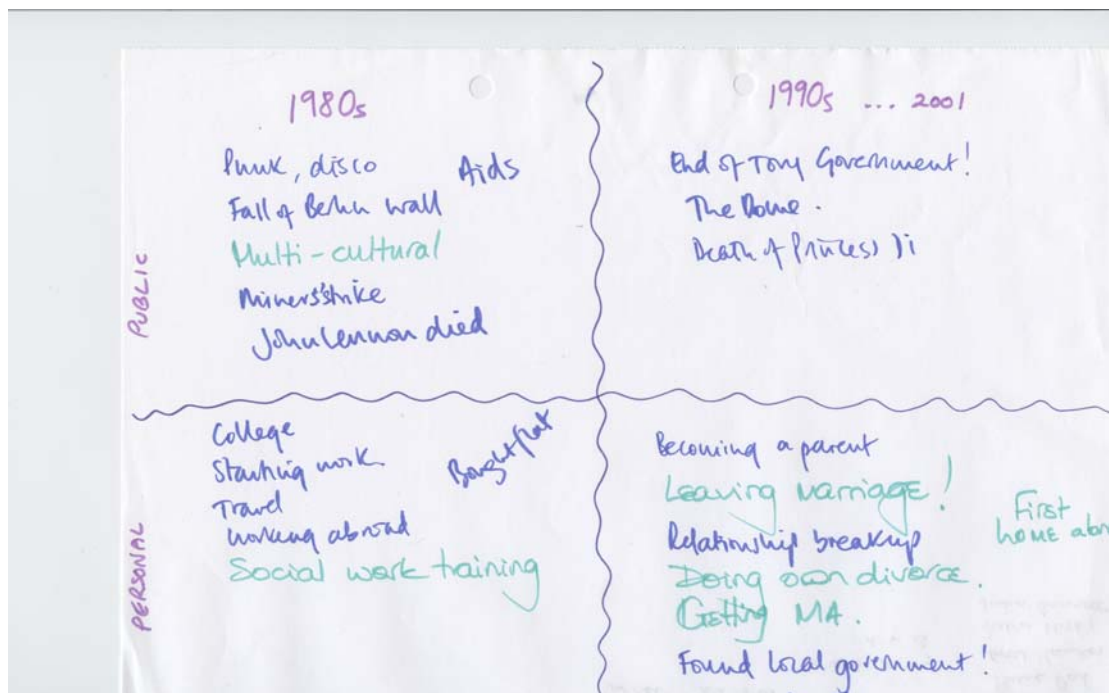
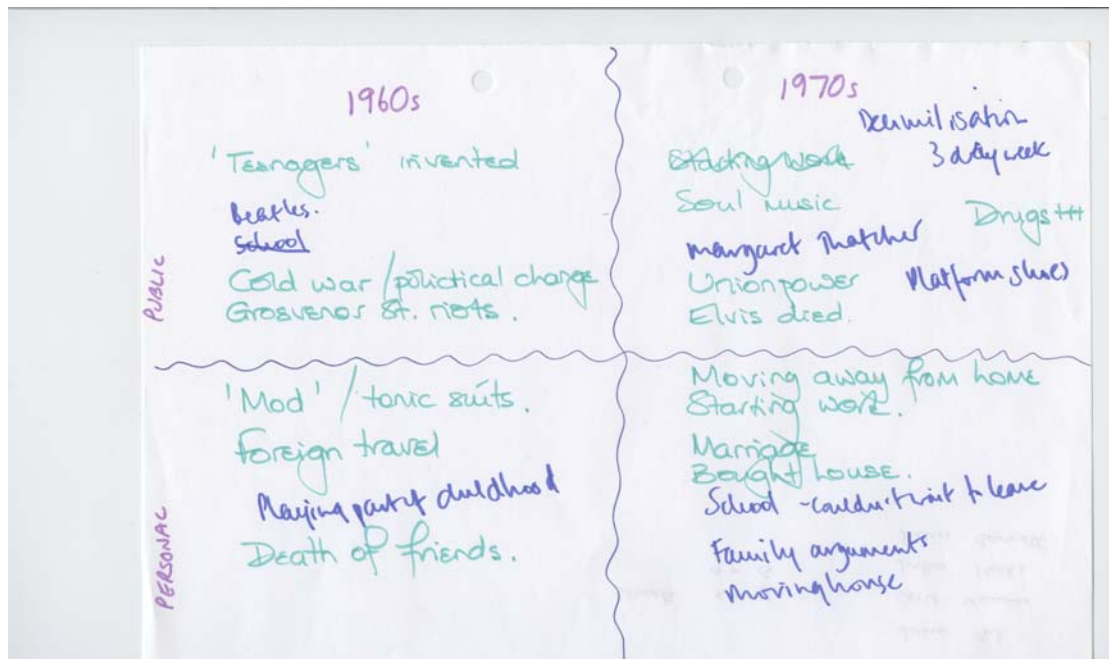
Fig 4 Mentions of Falklands War and Environment by Age





Appendix 2 Time Lines

Here is an example of a Timeline completed by a pair or trio of focus group participants from 1 of 6 groups totalling 44 participants.



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