

Saving grace: the changing resources of life-course coherence

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The Problem

How do, say, cross-generational couples (between 15 and 20 years apart) and single-mothers (under 45) re-entering the labour market who wish to combine work and re-training begin to plan and think about their futures: formulate, develop or accommodate aspirations to the changing methods and risks associated with different patterns of finance and potential life events?. Do well-formed 'household strategies' emerge? What factors now constitute well-formedness in such cases?

The concept of the life-course is increasingly tied to the difficulties now posed to its *coherence* and *sustainability* both by social actors, who need to somehow navigate their life-courses (while constructing them), and the institutions, governed by policy frameworks, which are brought into both chronic and contingent relationships with the life-course, and which impose their own constructs. Perhaps, nowhere is this issue brought into sharper relief than in the changing problems posed to people in planning and acting in ways so as to secure and manage income streams that will sustain their households and the kinds of aspirations that are formulated and negotiated within them.

From the point of view of the policymakers the sustainability and coherence of the life-course have relatively recently become issues of management and civic responsibility in new ways. This means that the actor's *navigation* of the life-course is coming under new forms of external scrutiny and evaluation. The character, and some of the implications of this, will be explored further below. From the actor's point of view the coherence of the life-course is affected by changing patterns of employment, training opportunities, support networks, friendships, residence patterns as well as representations of life-styles that circumscribe aspirations.

'Traditional' and routinised 'intellectual resources' that once might have been deployed to navigate the life-course, with whatever social effects, would now seem increasingly redundant to the actor. In contemporary circumstances, it has been argued, for example (Vass, 1998; Bauman, 2004) that coherence in day-to-day living is a matter of some considerable work. Whether one agrees that the struggle for coherence is a new thing or not it seems less arguable that detraditionalisation poses problems for the management of the life-course. The intellectual and emotional resources to deal with new problems are themselves subject to the forces of change.

Parsons (1991) would have acknowledged that change is inevitable and would have an impact on the management of the life-course. He would also have something to say about the processes by which we would adapt to new conditions. But for Parsons the association between social role and life-stage is essentially normative. The idea of a continually re-negotiable 'networked' life-course on a scale suggested by Castells (1996) would invoke social flexibilities unpalatable to Parsons. Castells presents us with a very challenging re-configuration of our understanding of the *course* of life. He imagines individual flexibility of such a nature that a life is coherently viewed

only from a set of inter-weaving earning, learning, consuming 'sequences'. In fact, 'life-sequencing' would be a more appropriate expression than perhaps managing the life-course. He celebrates this level of innovative flexibility.

The changes we observe now also would worry Schutz (1972) in respect of the kinds of methods, knowledges and understandings we could invoke to maintain 'projects' within the Lebenswelt. For Schutz the projects of our life-worlds involve 'managerial capacities' for defining and sustaining our projects. We are assisted in our endeavours by 'powers of narration' that can structure the future grammatically. Yet, with changing conventions circumscribing the multiple realities that constitute our experience of life stages our powers of life-course narration are challenged in this respect too. In respect of life-course management and financial behaviour, now subject to intense policy-making activity, there is evidence (Rowlingson, 2000) from across cross-sections of age and socio-economic groups, except the very well off, that indicates that the 'grammatical future' poses immense difficulties for people. These difficulties have implications for household economy, decision-making and management, structuring of life choices and re-negotiation of aspirations and life-styles.

The following discussion focuses on the relationship between life-course economic 'problem-solving' and the ways in which we can understand the complex relationships between household, individual, life-course, planning, finance and social policy. In order to get into the issues and difficulties posed by Rowlingson's study (ibid.) it will be necessary to assess the importance we can attach to the qualitative study of individual life-course structuring. The focus will be on why it is important to get a sense of the 'resources' available to the agent in such constructive work, and what the agent's relation is to these resources.

The argument suggests that:

- *Sociological debates* about 'household strategies' can be re-visited from the angle of investigating the 'intellectual resources' used we may be able to move toward Warde's (1990) strong definition of strategy without assuming we 'sit and pre-plan'. This move allows the exploration of wider social organisational aspects of 'economic thought'.
- *New policy frameworks* focus increasingly on individual behaviour and construct relationships between financial service providers and individuals such that provider discourse moralises and evaluates the consumer/client and may be incidental to client's construction of the life-course
- *The experiences* of cross-generation couples and single parents expose these matters to us in useful ways.

A demographic note

Some recent demographic pointers to conceptual and methodological questions regarding the life-course (Rigg and Sefton, 2004; Van Dalen and Verbon, 1999) have indicated that anomalies in life-course data need to be assessed from the actor's view point. While probabilistic data suggest that *life cycle stage* is highly predictive of financial profile (income, savings etc.) nevertheless, most individuals do not behave

as expected. Behaviour seems to have a greater connection with experience. While women experience financial benefits from partnership formation, they do more badly after partnership break-up. But, what they *do* next may depend on early experiences of wealth and poverty.

Sociological questions on 'household strategy' and economic behaviour

Within sociology the debate on how to understand economic activities at the household level have typically problematised the notions of both 'household' and 'strategy' as concepts and units of analysis. Wallace (2002) has helpfully set out the principal issues we face in coming to terms with these issues. In her review of the debates that have taken place over more than twenty years, she begins by exposing the tendency within sociology to pitch the question of economic strategy between two contested views of activity. That is, the debate is organised by the economist's assumption of the social actor as the rational agent who plans life in full cognisance of the issues that beset them or the non-reflexive constraints that impact on the actor as a consequence of social structural positioning in the economic order. However, she argues that,

“[M]any researchers find household strategies to be a useful concept in understanding household economic behaviour, because it steers a course between the Scylla of the 'oversocialised' conception of the individual...and the Charybdis of the calculating and resource-optimising *homo economicus* which is assumed in many economic models” (Wallace, 2002; p.278)

Although it is the case that, following from this, household strategies might be thought of as a way of understanding the interactions of structure and agency, the notion of the life-course as a unit of analysis in understanding economic behaviour requires us to re-visit the concept of strategy (yet) again. Why? Left as a definitional problem within the issues presented above we really can do little more than subscribe to one or other of Warde's (1990) 'strong' or 'weak' views of strategy. Either we assume the strong view that actors sit and plan with high degrees of reflexivity their economic activities, or some planning *can be inferred from the outcomes to household decisions*. If the strong view is unsustainable, as Warde finds, then this has to be a matter of qualitative methodological judgement. The preference for the weak view cannot be sustained on the same grounds and is of a different order of definition. The section above on demographic pointers to these questions, which dealt almost exclusively in the currency of behavioural outcomes, suggested that anomalies and problems still remain that require some other kind of approach.

Wallace's (ibid.) principal weapon in her argument for deploying household strategy as a methodological concept comes from empirical work in Eastern and Central European Countries (ECE). This shows that changing patterns of consumption, work, and alignments of cultural and political values can be linked to the concrete practical changes within the household. Thus evidence is cited, for example, which links emergent forms of stratification to the strategies associated with the emerging, new social status of the household. Thus, those households adopting 'market-oriented' 'strategies', combining new and traditional economic practices is leading to an emergent middle class. Micro-social levels of analysis have been used to indicate that

household planning activities determine social structure. Wallace does not go as far herself towards the latter but is clearly sympathetic to its tenor. From my point of view it is still the word 'strategy' that is misleading proceedings, as I discuss further below. The social change argument, however, is powerful and is supplemented by a discussion of post-Fordist culture in the West. Post-Fordism is partly defined by the breakdown of the Fordist employment career and family model to be replaced by 'flexible' employment and "more fragmented life-course trajectories". The effects of all this on the household are said to place new and more complex forms of planning requirements on households, greater requirements for 'reflexive thinking' and more responsibilities. This resonates with Bauman's observations that the life-course itself is faced with more, possibly irksome, work in its attempt to sustain coherence. As Wallace says,

"[H]ouseholds must learn to manage pensions, insurance education and health as these collective goods become more and more the responsibility of households rather than the state" (ibid. p.283).

If ironing, cleaning and walking the dog can be contracted out then clearly the whole business has become more complex and poses further managerial problems to us. While this appears to demand greater qualitative studies of the social contexts in which strategies are played out I want to draw attention to some apparently small features of this argument.

I readily acquiesce to the argument and feel it is broadly well-pitched. Although, it leads us in the right direction to a prioritising of the role of the social context of strategic activity, I think, firstly, that we must be wary of subjectivising households in the way the last quote suggests. In many ways the state, through current policy initiatives, is finding ways to further *individuate* responsibilities *within* households, as I shall argue below. Secondly, the life-course perspective problematizes the notion of social context. Aspects of context become features of experience that require reflexive management. We can no longer now avoid the question of what is a strategy and we must ask what it looks like to try to arrive at a 'strong' definition of strategic economic activity that is more sustainable than the one Warde rejects (1990).

The starting point for a realistic approach may lay in the social anthropological studies of economic activity that appear within ethnographic research. Generically linked to Mauss's notion in *The Gift* that economic activity and objects must be positioned as elements within the 'total social phenomenon' a number of studies have appeared since the early 1980s, almost in parallel with the literature on household economy, such as Lave's (1988) which looks in fine detail at the methods shoppers use to make decisions, calculate bargains, evaluate the state of the household finances etc.. There is discussion of these ideas and further ethnographic examples in Vass and Davis (1996). The latter looks at the impact of developing national social policies in Indonesia and their effects on local identities that are managed through economic and social exchanges in the marketplace.

The finding, that becomes an assumption of further analyses in these works, is the 'dialectical' and 'iterative' character of so-called 'rational' economic activity. Merttens and Vass (1987, 1990) report on observations of children solving money problems. The findings on these occasions were that the social organisation of the

group was *itself* recruited into the steps through which money problems were solved in group situations. Contingently allocated responsibilities, by the children themselves, for money management and problem-solving by members of the group, were re-negotiated through the course of the problem-solving as *part of the method* of making decisions leading to behavioural outcomes.

Jean Lave's work showed similar results. Formal rational activity is shown to be an artefact of economic modes of description of everyday economic activities. Shoppers assess supermarket 'bargains', for example, by referring to kitchen cupboard space limitations, the social effects, and interpersonal politics, of changing favourite brands on the household members, contingently negotiable definitions of 'good and bad' decisions that depend on fads, diets, a mother's understanding of life-course changes in children etc.. Even definitions of family and household membership can also be changed in the context of financial planning. From the perspective of such research the notions of 'social context' and 'strategy' are often called into question. Lave (ibid.) found that minimally she had to adopt Barker's (1984, cited in Lave, ibid.) distinction between the 'arena' and 'setting' of a supermarket for referring respectively to the social structural principles that organise consumption behaviour and the phenomenological principles that define the constructive and dialectical character of supermarket shopping.

Summary

While one can say that household members' economic activities lead, to summative household outcomes (giving us the 'weak' sense of strategy), nevertheless considerable other effects are often achieved which can lead, among other things, to local re-definitions of the household itself. I would argue that by accepting the dialectical and iterative character of household economic activity we are moving closer to the implications of the 'strong' definition of strategy without saying that the economy is somehow 'pre-planned'. What we are doing, I believe, is spelling out the implications of making space for the social actor's 'cosmology' within financial planning and the interactions this is likely to have with the life-course and methods of making it coherent. Whatever such 'methods' might involve, their dialectical quality implies greater non-financial practice and knowledge than we may ordinarily assume. The nature of this knowledgeability will be further explored through the evidence emerging from the present study.

Changing Policy Frameworks and the Focus on Strategy and Behaviour

My argument here is that the policy drivers for the changing demographic profile of the West, particularly the implications for ageing, have made an impact, in quite detailed ways, on policies governing areas that link directly to the life-course, at all points in the life-cycle, and its management. The policies may be connected to citizenship, education or financial services, but we are seeing an increased tendency to both evaluate and 'pedagogize' people. This is partly achieved by viewing their behaviour as already strategic in some sense. While policy readily connects our economic planning to our wider duties as citizens it does not connect our biographical experiences as involved in some way in our abilities to make sense of our life-courses. Rather policy seeks to alter our 'deficient' sense-making methods to fit with financial products appropriate to rational assessments of our stage in the life-cycle.

Starting at macro policy levels, *Maintaining Prosperity in an Ageing Society* (OECD, 1998) sets out seven principles to organise national level policy thinking on ageing issues. All principles respond to issues of demographic change and focus on ways of designing the structure of provision through attending to the *collective outcomes* of people's life cycle decisions. So, taxation and pension systems, for example, should remove incentives to early retirement, and reforms are seen as needed to ensure job opportunities for older workers. However, Principle 4 proposes shifting retirement income to a mixed basis involving state funding, private earnings and savings in order to diversify risk and "to give individuals more flexibility over their retirement decision". Principle 6 involves strengthening the financial market infrastructure with a 'modern effective regulatory framework' (which I shall show below involves setting up 'pedagogical relations' with people's financial strategies). Principle 7 advises immediate action to ensure there is enough time to 'build up public understanding'.

In the UK the Financial Services Authority (FSA) began its strategy for 'consumer education' in 1998 (FSA, 9/1998), resulting in a policy statement in May 1999 (FSA, 5/1999). These statements were informed by, among other things, research on existing 'educational activity' in the financial services sector (Vass, 1998). There is clearly a major task ahead for which the FSA has been marshalling considerable energy. Already, we are seeing changes to the ways in which advice is given to customers by banks, building societies and savings companies over products from mortgages, tax-exempt savings involving equities, to long term health care insurance. In some cases these products are being geared to catering for life-course changes such as bereavement, divorce and unplanned children. I will comment further again below on these developments after mentioning other parallel policy moves that are associated with the OECD directives (cf. Hicks, 2004).

I have previously (Vass 2000, 2001) set out the imperatives that have required government attention turn to the daily competences and literacies that people use to navigate their life-course and render it intelligible.

"The UK government has attempted to provide for the long-term consequences of ageing populations (Denham DSS 98/225) and the pensions shortfall by legislating for a variety of modes of savings plans and pension arrangements. However, the government's advisers chose to highlight the commonly acknowledged *shortfall in the knowledge and understanding connected with 'social and financial literacy'*." (Vass, 2001)

Again, citing the radical changes to family structures, forms of parenting and human association quoted in government reports I represented the situation in the following way.

"In connection with citizenship the UK government...appointed an advisory group (Crick Report, 1998). It acknowledged the rapid changes within everyday life which have impacted on our understanding and practice of social rights, duties, obligations and relationships. In particular, and within the advisory group's terms of reference, Crick was asked to look at citizenship education in relation to 'the *underlying economic realities* of everyday life'. *Both public and personal economic awareness were identified as key areas of understanding to be provided for within education services.* The importance of these developments must not be underestimated. The

Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has informed and extended these proposals. The CBI takes a life-long view of developing social, economic and industrial understanding to the extent of proposing that such matters become a permanent feature of the pre-16 curriculum as well as at the centre of post-16 training and career planning (Crick, 1998: #5.5).” (Vass, 2001, p.xx)

The consequence of the foregoing is that through a variety of media, including formal education and modes of financial service consumption, a series of collective social issues from financial exclusion to ageing populations will be tackled by targeting life-course management skills and the socio-economic understandings of the citizen.

This brings us to one of the central questions of the present study. While Warde (1990) finds, from the sociological point of view, that the strong definition of household strategy as the pre-planned management of household economy unsustainable, it is clear that current policy and the media through which it is implemented, either suggests that it *does* take place or that it *can*. The new responsibilities and duties of the citizen are increasingly predicated on this assumption: that strong strategy either is the case but needs some tweaking or modification, or that it can be inculcated.

Life Course Intelligibility and Financial ‘Literacy’

Financial literacy is seen as the solution to many problems. It represents a genuine attempt to tackle social and financial exclusion. It is a key recommendation in studies looking at, for example: low income households and the problems of the avoidance of financial services by ethnic minorities (Kempson, 1998a,b) and the mounting problem of credit card debt (Rowlingson and Kempson, 1993). A study by Kempson and Whyley (1999) using data from the Family Resources Survey and interview data from a sample of the sector defined as ‘financially excluded’ shows interactive effects between life course ‘stage’ and financial products available to that stage. In other words, while we frequently associate, say, lack of access to cash from a provider with the criteria for financial exclusion, Kempson and Whyley indicate that individuals move in and out of that excluded sector at various times. For example, this may be as a consequence of different types of borrowing product becoming associated with different life stages as defined by providers. But also the borrowers’ definitions of their life stages may entice them back into a relationship with a provider. The word ‘literacy’ in this context is useful in one sense, but it also suggests that the intellectual resources we *routinely* draw on to make sense of the world can, in relation to economic planning at least, render us ‘illiterate’. I am sure that better financial knowledge and skills would help most of us, particularly those at risk. However, in the pursuit of this I am keen we do not overlook the finer social inter-connections and sense-making practices that, from the financial perspective, appear as irrelevant in some way to the ‘rational task’ facing people in the life-course. These ‘other resources’ are seen as irrelevant at best and worthy of excision at worst.

The concept of financial ‘literacy’ implies that there is ‘text’ of some kind. It implies at least two kinds of texts for our purposes. The concept suggests that the financial and economic problems and products that appear within the life-course are textual and that the life-course itself is available for textual scrutiny, whatever that might mean.

Both these ‘texts’ need in some way to be rendered routinely intelligible. This suggestion actually implies a stronger definition of ‘strategy’ than the strong one Warde (ibid.) and Wallace (ibid.) find they cannot align themselves with. So, we might ask in what ways are we dealing with ‘texts’ here at all. Firstly, we might look at financial texts.

Knights et al (1999) reported a project on the problems associated with the financial educational context and material that financial services use as a consequence of responding to the policy drivers outlined previously. They identify like Aldridge (1997) that financial services form a ‘promotional culture’ in which information and persuasion are inextricably linked. Knights et al (ibid.) suggest that current policies attempt to construct the citizen as self-reliant and that they attempt to impose financial self-discipline. The mechanism for achieving this ‘liberal utopia’ has resulted in the proliferation of financial information for the ‘rational masculine subject’ to evaluate and assess in the planning of their life course. One of the consequences of new regulatory policies for financial services has been an increase in the volume of information supplied to the consumer. The latter is required to make all kinds of ‘informed choices’ based on comparative data which is often difficult to interpret by experts. Their conclusions from the way in which consumers behave in response to this information dispel some of the grounding assumptions of current policy. The following table, quoted and adapted from the report, is a summary of the problems with the central assumptions behind economic and life course intelligibility.

Policy Implicit Assumptions	Response informed by Knights et al’s Research
People pursue economic rational self-interest	Rationality is diverse [...]
Shopping around ensures rational choice and reinforces competition and efficiency	Product proliferation makes comparisons difficult/impossible [...]
Individual decision-making to satisfy essential [household] needs	Consumption patterns are complex and social (e.g. family or peer group driven) and is not independent of advertising/sales where ‘needs’ are constructed
Risks subject to rational calculation	Technical calculations of risk is only one [strategy], and not that ordinarily adopted by consumers [...]
[Information, knowledge, education and advice all operate in the same way and may be ‘conflated’ by provider or consumer to arrive at a singular judgement]	Links between [each of] these concepts [can be made – but critical factors are]: timing, relevance of content [to life-stage] and participation in learning

Table 1: Assumptions and responses underlying financial literacy practices (Adapted from source Knights et al (1999) p.12) Adaptations have been made following explanations elsewhere in the text of the report.

Knights et al’s research employed focus groups and educational workshops among its methods. The issue of how and why information, advice, knowledge and education are ‘conflated’ *texts* leads to problems for those attempting to make the life-course

coherent from a financial point of view. What is missed, according to the study, are the concepts of ‘meaning, understanding and relevance’. But why do people confuse advice with information? The relevant conceptual and theoretical debate is not pursued in the report cited.

We need to understand how the life-course, as a text, is being brought into relationships with the ‘texts’ of financial literacy, which the research above begins to do. We need to understand how these relationships produce and control the differences between these textual forms and what ‘conflation’ means in the light of this. Drawing on Dowling’s (1998) analysis of the sociology of mathematics education, one might say that ‘expert discourses’ (here economics and high finance) and the regulatory frameworks that govern advisors are both ‘strongly coded’ in so far as the concepts they use require considerable training. The major difference between these forms of talk is that ‘advice discourse’ operates at the quite different level of the consumer where it has the potential effects of structuring the life-course. The discourse available to the person trying to make their life-course cohere is ‘weakly coded’ insofar as its terms and reference points are always open to re-negotiation and where the ‘principles of evaluation’ of events to those reference points (see Dowling, *ibid.*) tend to have a basis in ‘tradition’. An example of this issue taken from a case study of a 39 year old single mother attempting to address financing her retirement is given below in the reports on case studies. The theoretical point is that reference points provided by strongly coded texts (e.g. economic modelling) are simply not available to us routinely. What then can the life-course manager draw on in new circumstances where they are trying to make sense of new products *and* see their life-course in terms of them? What in fact happens as we try to make sense? Leyshon et al (1998), also adopting, a ‘textual analysis’ of the provider-client relationship concluded interestingly that, where promotional culture prevails, new relations of trust have to be forged. When clients see themselves making decisions involving risk, where can re-assurance come from? The client ‘thinks’ through economic problems *through identifying* with provider *brands*. Effectively then, we could be dealing with a situation where the appropriate, and critical, interpretation of ‘conflation’ is that the means by which people come to understand and structure their life-course planning is *progressively displaced* by the fields more narrowly defined as financial. But, in so doing, it is not a methodology that is more ‘rational’ or ‘literate’ in the sense defined by policy that is necessarily adopted. Brand identification, as an intellectual resource for making sense of the life-course, seems to me not quite what the policy-makers have in mind.

Summary

Policy-making has led to the definition of ideal practice in life-course-planning as one that needs to be made literate. The consequence of this is that the agent is invited to create ‘literate sense-making’ activities between financial products (as texts) the localised economic components of their current life stage (as a text) and their life-course (as a text). This returns us back to the central problem of the idea of the strong view of household strategy: how do people render their life courses intelligible?

‘Planning’ in the Life Course?

The implications of policies and their implementation described above is that we have regulated financial institutions and government which constitute us in what

Rowlingson (2000) has called a 'moralised space'. Drawing on an interview study looking at the difficulties of life-course planning among different socio-economic groups, she finds that the huge shift of emphasis from state to individual planning makes, as we have seen above, huge assumptions about people's ability to plan ahead. The 'planners' are seen as 'sensible and good', while the 'non-planners' are seen as 'irresponsible free-loaders'. Respondents found planning "depressing because little certainty and coherence could be constructed from the known". This indicates that the 'inability' to plan is not primarily linked to 'deficits' in the cognitive capacities of individuals or their 'knowledges'. I would say, *it is not primarily linked at all to the principal targets which policies have been seeking to transform and regulate*. I will discuss this further in the context of my own activities and findings.

LIFE-COURSE COHERENCE: CONTEXT AND METHODS

Making sense and deploying intellectual resources to make one's life-course cohere is going to involve perhaps not necessarily 'strategies' but some kind of discursive attempt to represent the future. The ability to do this was central to Schutz's (1972) understanding of what is crucial for stability in the life-world. I think, in many ways, we are returned to Schutz's work in considering the life-course and the problems it poses us. Firstly, I want to return briefly to Rowlingson's (2000) study to see how issues connected to coherence and life-course planning impact on people's thinking about their lives and their futures. Secondly, I will describe the context of my own empirical work and cite case studies.

Rowlingson's (ibid.) study involved 41 in-depth interviews with men and women from different age/lifecycle groups and socio-economic situations. For the present discussion the findings are immensely interesting. While the future is uncertain for us all, different age groups spend different amounts of time thinking about it. Those who think about it structure it into different 'lengths' which are formed by anticipated events e.g. paying off a debt or a child starting school. If I may impose my own words, the medium-term future (the next year or two) was 'event dependent' and linked to the biographical projections of the interviewee. However, the medium and long term future seemed to belong to a 'life in general' on which the national and global issues we are presented with in common are played out as forces beyond our own control. The impact of this on, say pension planning, meant that people felt that decisions taken now may always be overtaken by events from *beyond the life-course*.

Financial products tell us to expect the unexpected as if these events were located deep in the future, outside but near the life-course. In terms of events like marriage, divorce, pregnancy, redundancy etc. Rowlingson's interviewees identified conflicts between planning ahead, and taking particular measures *to pre-empt* the effects and *planning for* what to do *should* these events arise. What I would note here is to ask what constitutes the difference between (1) a pre-emptive measure to ward off the financial effects of divorce to which a financial product is a solution, and (2) what the individual fears might happen to them in this situation?

The 'future' from this can be seen as a discursive 'worry and anticipation space'. The relatively wealthy interviewees did not think about the future. Having financial plans in place somehow de-mobilises the impact of both expected events (children starting school) and possible ones (redundancy) in the same way. For the less well off the

reality of the anticipated events mobilises the possible as part of the worrying 'life in general' conditions under which one approaches anticipated events but cannot do anything about.

People tend to think about and plan for positive events, anticipatory planning, like getting married. Precautionary planning, for ill health etc., was not so much in evidence in Rowlingson's study.

The Present Study

Two cross-generational couples and three single mothers (divorced and separated) between 34 and 43 years old (ages at December, 2004) have been involved in helping me develop research protocols for a future planned study. This aims at using focus groups on the issues of life-course understanding and economic behaviour. The kinds of problems and issues faced in the lives of the present sample illuminate the issues that have been raised so far in the present discussion.

The Interviewees

The interviewees in this study were found through contacts in two adult study centres in London and the South-West. Contacts at the study centres mediated the initial contacts. The interviewees had responded to invitations to day workshops at the study centres on either 'Planning for a Secure Retirement' or 'Financial Planning for Your Child's School Years'. Between five and six semi-structured interviews took place over the period July 2002 to January 2003 for each case study. The interviews were taped. CGC = cross-generational couple; SM = single divorced/separated mother; SP = single person.

CGC1 (Sid 51 and Nancy 29, relationship four years old at 12/2004) Sid developed health problems while working for his local city council in the North-West where he had been employed for 25 years. His wife had died some years previously and had left him a single parent of Jo a daughter (aged 19). Jo became a university student at 18 living at home. Sid had met Nancy, 29 from London, at a party and began a relationship that became more serious. Sid took the decision to move to London, co-habit with Nancy, and set his daughter up in her own home while renting out his own property. The local authority pension did not materialise as the health problems were thought not so severe. Nancy is middle ranking executive officer (income circa £30K) in an advertising company and subscribes to a private pension scheme. Nancy wants to have children of her own.

CGC2 (Jack 46 and Jill 28, relationship six and a half years old at 12/2004) Jack is a journalist writing freelance for several different company magazines (income varies annually between circa £25K-£45). He has two school age children from a previous marriage. His former wife has re-married and the children live with her and her new husband. Jill qualified as a teacher several years previously and is currently doing supply teaching. Jill wants to have children of her own.

SM1 (Linda 34) Linda has one daughter, Sara (14) from an unplanned pregnancy with a partner who has not been in contact for many years. Linda combines part-time work as a secretary with a firm of solicitors (income c. £10K) with attempts at re-training

and further study courses. She has no pension provision. Linda is a local authority tenant.

SM2 (Grace 39) Grace is divorced with two sons (14 and 16) living at home. Her ex-husband pays maintenance and, while having another family of his own seeks to involve Grace's sons in sporting activities with his second family. Grace started work after her divorce in pharmaceutical sales and now earns, with commissions circa £40K. She started an equities-based pension fund in 1997 aged 32 on the advice of her ex-husband, and took out a 'high risk' portfolio in technology shares. She put accumulated savings into this over three years. The value of this fund plummeted after the stock market 'correction' in 2001. She has not been able to attend to the implications since taking promotion at work. Both her sons want to go to university and she is considering the financial implications of this.

SM3 (Clara 43) Clara is divorced with a son (9) and daughter (6). Her ex-husband pays maintenance but the on-going co-ordination of affairs between their households is managed through solicitors. Clara was left with the large family house in a village area where children need to be taken to school by car. This restricts employment opportunities. Clara works part-time translating for a firm in London. She is now dependent on her ageing mother to supplement her finances and help with the children while she works. Clara has aspirations for university study.

The Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were organised around economic themes looking at the relations between representations of the life-course and their management of, or approach to, finance in respect of:

- Credit (cards, bank/other loans)
- Bank accounts
- Property (tenancy, ownership, mortgage)
- Savings (instant cash, insurance based, medium/long term and equities)
- Insurance (health, redundancy, mortgage)

In relation to:

- 'Stakeholder' obligations (stakeholders in economic behaviour, say with children, will involve non-household members such as ex-husbands)
- Plans (holidays, further study/training)
- Future aspirations (children, university)
- Risk

The task is to examine how problems are formulated, what kinds of 'intellectual resources' are deployed and what the social implications are with these 'constructions'. For present purposes I shall draw particularly on data for 'risk' and for 'property'. These will illustrate some the issues raised in the preceding discussion and suggest further lines of inquiry.

Like Rowlingson's work each household shows anxiety and uncertainty when facing the future. Although the uncertainty is not financial in origin for each respondent in

the first instance each case makes rapid connection with the ways in which insecure finances impact on the feelings of uncertainty. But what intellectual means came to the fore in formal situations? Grace, reports that, with hindsight, the discussions she had had with financial advisers had not prepared her for the very real risks that eventually befell her when the value of her pension savings had collapsed.

“I thought I’d understood the risk thing he was on about...but it was all to do with my ex-husband’s insurance, I can’t remember...but he did ask me about my attitude to risk. He drew a line on a piece of paper and with ten marks on it, with one for very cautious and ten for high risk and asked me where I would place myself on the line...I said well, I don’t always take my brolly when I go out but I always strap the kids in the car... in the end I said ‘seven’, but I don’t know what it means really” (Grace, 39).

In this example, and in the terms of reference of this discussion we see the interaction between ‘expert’ and ‘public’ domains of talk. Risk as applied to equity funds is a very technical mathematical matter and access to its power requires training in a ‘strongly coded’ discourse. Yet, the regulations that bind financial advisers require them to ascertain the client’s attitude to risk. In public domain discourse the conversation is ‘weakly coded’ and Grace has to use routine examples drawn from habits that deal with everyday pre-cautionary behaviour and apply them to processes that relate to security in retirement. Lack of adequate personal provision for Grace has restricted her freedom to make changes with her employment situation. She feels obliged to remain in sales, but now is concerned about funding her sons’ education.

By comparison Clara is held immobile and indecisive in the face of her ‘futures’. As a ‘flexible’ worker Clara has always tried to keep her options open. She argues that

“[I]f I can keep the study going it might lead to exactly the job I want, then I wouldn’t have to keep relying on my mum to look after the kids. One option is that we could sell the house and move away from him [ex-husband]...while I have to pay the mortgage on this place we’ll always be dependent. [...] I did think of us all selling up and moving to Spain, a friend at work had been thinking about it, and it would be good for the kids, there’s nothing here for us [...] we could rent this house out and my mum could sell hers to fund the move, but then we’d have to live together...it might work I’d like to learn Spanish”. (Clara, 43)

Clara’s ‘futures’ are permanently multi-dimensional in character. Her tools for planning largely involve treating both her own and her mother’s home as flexible assets. One might describe this ‘method’ as entertaining a ‘portfolio of well-formed fantasies’. In many ways all these possible futures are highly articulated down to fine details. Clara has answers for what her mother might do in Spain, how the children might be educated, how she would change her work pattern, what forms of study she might undertake, what kinds of promotion this would get her etc.. In a series of rhetorical devices Clara deploys elements of her well-formed futures not to plan her future but to think about the present and evaluate the past. Clara’s management of sets of heterogeneous future scenarios seems to be involved in de-stabilising her present.

Similar patterns of talking were found with both cross-generational couples. The ability to make detailed and alternative constructions of the future was conspicuous by

the flair and inventiveness that appears in the interviews. But in a much more stark way aspects of their stories about the futures that they narrate seem to involve drawing on the results of planning work in order to understand aspects of and make decisions in the present. Jill and Jack's relationship has survived a number of years, but, to some extent, the separation of their finances has become a feature and 'test' of their commitment. Jack refuses to allow Jill to contribute to the mortgage repayments. They both treat the house as a 'flexible asset' in stories which relate to their preparations for Jack's future retirement when Jill will work full-time and they will 'down-shift' and move to the country. But the stories avoid the timing of this event. Jill does not wish to wait fifteen years to have children. To have children now would remove the security afforded by Jill's job. For Jack the house is connected his concern for the future financial security of his existing children.

"[I]f I lost the house, or any of its equity really I'd have nothing for them, I owe them something afterall...[.]..It may be they won't need it, or might not go onto a Uni, but the way house prices are going they'll never get on the ladder, you can't really say what their mother's new bloke will do, how he'd treat them.[.] Jill gets upset sometimes about this..I mean she loves them [the existing children] but we just don't know how things are gonna turn out" (Sid, 46)

And Jill,

"I feel I don't know what's going on sometimes, either we are together or we're not...sometimes the house feels like mine but when we sit and talk money I know it's not...not that I feel [...] insecure or anything about Jack but it means...like what we have together becomes something different and we seem to start all over again...why are here, what are we doing" (Jill, 28)

The story involving the house's classification as a flexible asset feeds a number of detailed scenarios. But elements of those scenarios are used to think through how current obligations work and how they might evolve. Thus, Jack's plans form the basis of his discussions with his ex-wife and are used to sense how her new husband is situated with respect to his own children. These discussions have a dialectical impact on how aspects of Jack and Jill's relationship are elaborated. Sid and Nancy's situation follows similar lines. In this case Nancy's job and house forms the basis on which their relationship plans can evolve. Effectively, Sid's house in the NW provides the infrastructural commitments to his existing daughter who is expected to become independent at some time before Sid reaches state pensionable age. Neither Jill nor Nancy will be drawn at any great length of what will happen if Jack and Sid fall ill or die. There are no clear arrangements in place which cover the implications of the women surviving the men.

From cursory analyses of these data connected with treating the house as an 'asset class' some consistent patterns are beginning to emerge. The financial planning of aspirations, as many have observed, is connected in complex ways to the organisation of the social world and the patterns of obligation it entails. What I seek to suggest is that the way people approach the task of making their life-courses cohere several things happen.

Firstly, financial entities such as mortgages appear in anticipatory practices in ways that can structure the dynamics of relationships (as in Jack and Jill's cross-generation case). This is similar to Pahl's (1999) finding that the introduction of 'electronic money' within couples' ways of managing their economy give rise to new forms of relationship control. Secondly, and this is something I now seek to explore further, the methods people devise to manage their finances in the context of representing their life-course trajectories involve discursive work oriented towards understanding the contours of the social worlds they inhabit. From the examples above we see

- Strategies of narrating multiple possible futures to grasp and evaluate a 'de-stabilised' present.
- Use of narrations of the future to give shape to feelings toward an 'incoherent' present and how others are situated in it.
- With CGCs the problems connected with composing jointly-shared narrations becomes part of a method for evaluating the evolving character of the relationship.

This is all a long way from both *homo economicus* and a life-course understood through the outcomes of stages.

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