Calendar interviewing:
Enhancing conversation and escaping the "biographical illusion"

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The narrative turn, allied with a 'militant affiliation' to the theory of individualisation has led to the occasional neglect of Bourdieu's warnings about the 'biographical illusion' and the substitution of the object of study with biographical interviews that are reproduced literally and enthusiastically as if all of the social and temporal contexts that are essential to sociological interpretation are encapsulated within the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee or in the informants' 'narrative version'. On the ideological-scientific side, often as a result of their eagerness to give interviewees a voice, some social scientists lose theirs. On the practical-methodological side, the illusion of analytical order made possible by CAQDAS (computer assisted qualitative data analysis) may entice researchers to codify rather than analyse, and of proceeding to a 'content demonstration' rather than 'content analysis'. This article will present a 'mixed technique' alternative for approaching temporality and reflexivity with the aim of being rid of the excesses of the theory of individualisation and to avoid the 'biographical illusion' through a combination of biographical interviews (qualitative tradition) and life calendars (quantitative tradition).

About the biographical turn and illusions: An introduction

The development of qualitative research in the social sciences, the appropriation of this by researchers, their theoretical affiliations and recent developments in content analysis software have increasingly justified Bourdieu's warning in relation to the 'biographical illusion' (1997 [1993]). Regarding this, Bourdieu stated that 'the narrative, whether biographical or autobiographical, for example, the discourse of the interviewee who 'opens up' to and interviewer, offers events which may not at all or always unfold in their strict chronological succession (anybody who has ever collected life histories knows that informants constantly lose the thread of strict chronological order) but which nevertheless tend or pretend to get organized into sequences linked to each other on the basis of intelligible relationships. The subject and the object of the biography (the interviewer and the interviewee) have in a sense the same interest in accepting the *postulate of the meaning of narrated existence* (and, implicitly of all existence)' (Bourdieu 1997 [1993]: 54). In fact, the narrative or biographical turn in the social sciences (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraft 2000), the emergence of an 'interview society' (Atkinson and Silverman 1997) and the 'militant affiliation' of researchers to the individualisation thesis promoted by Beck (1992) and Giddens (2001 [1991]) Nico 2011) could make the collection and analysis of qualitative data appear naïve, inviting the interviewer/researcher to uncritically follow the coherent, but not very reflexive, narrative of the recounted life episodes. Some of the methodological strategies that emphasise and respect the temporality of events, as well as the reflexivity that they are given by the respondents, can be developed in such a way as to mitigate this biographical 'illusion' or naivety. This is precisely what this article proposes, with the presentation of the operationalization and the advantages of the use of the 'mixed technique' composed of the life calendar and by the biographical interview, and of their contextualisation in the different research paradigms.

The methods are a product of their time and space (MacLeod and Thomson 2009: 6). This being so, the turn and the biographical illusion that characterises part of the actual state of qualitative research can be understood as the culmination of ideological, technical and theoretical paths of this type of research towards their institutionalisation and identification in the much wider field of the social sciences. The propensity for the 'biographical illusion' (Bourdieu 1997 [1993]) is therefore permeable to some of the vestiges of the epistemological waves of the qualitative studies, to the apparent simplicity of analysis proposed by CAQDAS and to the thesis of individualisation. In this article we will discuss the use of this technique in the light of wider and current methodological and theoretical paradigms.

Epistemological remnants and the fascination with life history

The course of qualitative research in the social sciences is characterised by five epistemological waves (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). While in the traditional period, which is generally considered to be the period from 1900 to 1950, the scientific paradigm was largely positivist and researchers engaged in qualitative research were essentially concerned with producing 'objective', valid and reliable interpretations (Denzin and Lincoln 1998), this import of scientific legitimacy by mimicking the exact

and natural sciences ceased to be either the practise or concern during the decades that followed.[1] Until this point, the term 'methodology' was almost exclusively used in quantitative methodologies (Gobo 2005), and methodological reflection served only the purposes of quantitative research, attributing qualitative studies a merely secondary and subordinate role. Because of this it was necessary to counter Hughe's much repeated idea, that 'the only way to learn field methods was to 'get the set of your pants dirty' in real research' (*in* Fielding 2004: 29). In the 'modernist' or 'golden' age of qualitative research, from 1950-1970, while yet appreciating social realism and ethnographies and while the temptation to formalise qualitative methods still existed (in parallel with the emergence of new interpretative theories, such as ethnomethodology, critical theory and feminism), largely through multi-method research designs (the simultaneous use of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, the qualitative and quantitative analysis of collected data), qualitative research began to be associated with a new goal: 'giving voice' to social minorities, disadvantaged classes, those on the fringes who were discriminated against or who were less integrated into society (Denzin and Lincoln 1998).

There are innumerable examples, within the scientific field, of the vestiges of this concern with the representation of groups characterised by a certain degree of social invisibility, ranging from subdomains or sociological themes such as youth, childhood and the experiences of the disabled to theoretical currents based on 'action research' into 'empowerment', etc.. When taken to the extreme, this concern can often mean the 'biographical illusion' is not an obstacle to research, but is the goal in itself, to the extent that the role of the social analyst is confused with that of the 'spokesperson' or that of the social activist. A candid idea of a 'pure relationship' (Giddens 2001 [1991]) between the interviewee and the interviewer, associated with the idea of the authenticity of the recorded narrative promotes, perhaps without precedent, the 'biographical illusion' to which Bourdieu called attention (Bourdieu 1997 [1993]). Due to the parallel, political or ideological goals of the 'object of research', this promoted a deficit of mistrust in relation to the data collected and a fascination with life histories, which in turn led to the naïve collection and analysis of data.

The development of CAQDAS and the illusion of objectivity

Among the future directions of qualitative social science research, Gobo (2005) identifies the increased formalisation of methods, increased development of data analysis and a better marriage between the software and the qualitative analysis. The formalisation of methods increases the validity and trustworthiness of the results, which permits a reversal of the tendency of associating the analysis of data to the quantitative paradigm and the collection of data to the qualitative paradigm; while an improved relationship between the software and the qualitative analysis allows us to act on the larger obstacles to the validation of qualitative methods, improving the classification system and the level of transparency. However, it is also necessary to temper this 'formalisation' of the data with some methodological reflection, protecting

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[1] As we shall see in more detail below, this positivist paradigm reappeared, albeit in a more critical for, with the development and use of CAQDAS.

it from an excessively mathematical approach (Gobo 2005). Ever since its first appearance in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1980s, much of the discussion regarding the development of CAQDAS has called attention to this very aspect.

CAQDAS are computer programs designed to assist in the analysis of qualitative data (Kelle 1997) by detecting, organising, categorising and annotating textual and visual data. It must be understood as 'a tool, a catalyst in the research process … and only as a facilitator, not as an end in itself. In any event, a computer program can ever replace the creativity, the good sense and the sociological vision of the researcher' (Teixeira and Becker 2001: 110). While it brings many advantages, including time and cost savings, improved efficiency in the processing of large volumes of information, potentially greater control over the research process, greater ease in reproducing, exchanging and uniting documents and improved analytical transparency, there are also some drawbacks. These include a greater distance between the researcher and the data, the false homogeneity between the methods of analysing the data (which inhibits the researcher's creativity and creates an illusion of objectivity) and the potential loss of the richness of the narrative caused by the excessive fragmentation of the data. As a consequence of these criticisms, and the fact that these programs are more suited to vertical than horizontal content analysis, the use of CAQDAS must be critical and conscious in such a way as to overcome some of the analytical obstacles.

The critical and conscious use of CAQDAS will, on the one hand, help avoid the substitution of 'content analysis' for the practice of codification (König, na) or the simple 'demonstration of content' and, on the other, the imposition of logics of causality and of quantification where they do not exist. Thus, on the one hand, it must prevent itself from 'lapsing into a simple reproduction of the observed subjects' discourses (whether verbal or non-verbal), rejecting the analysis (the 'sophisticated' version of 'scientific populism or the metamorphosis of the myth of neutrality), practising the prophecy or admitting, as social scientists, the self-creation of agents (and of their feelings and dispositions), as if a profound, irreversible and comfortable emptiness moves them' (Lopes 2002: 63). In the wake of these analysis 'lives and narratives voices seem to be recounted in a social vacuum, rather than the products of socially shared conventions, constructed in practical circumstances of everyday life and work, with real consequences for social actors' (Atkinson 2005). On the other hand, we must also take into account the fact 'quantification is without doubt a strategy that is replete with virtues, although there is no justification for not recognising the successes of qualitative research. The rigour is not exclusively that of quantification, and nor does quantification in itself guarantee the sought after validity and reliability' (Vala 1986: 103).

In sum, the analysis of content cannot be hostage to the statistical possibilities of these programs and the space for the 'human eye and interpretative act' must always be guaranteed (Evers 2011).

The theory of individualisation and the excess of 'verticality'

The militant affiliation to the thesis of individualisation, allied to the narrative turn in the social sciences has not infrequently produced that which Thompson calls the 'failing of much quantitative work in the postmodern or narrative modes' (2004: 254). The fascination with the research process, with the reflexive practices of the interviewees and researchers involved makes the "interactive research process the centre of study in itself, and forget what can be learnt from the stories which are told" (Thompson 2004: 254).

The biographical turn and the individualisation thesis infect qualitative research like a virus. While for several decades it was the horizontal analysis that 'treated each of the themes, stressing the different forms under which it appeared in the people surveyed' (Ghiglione and Matalon 1997) and which serves as 'a logic of generalist inference anchored in the representational typology' (Conde 1993: 206) that was the most developed; in more recent years vertical analysis have become more prevalent. With works such as that of Lahire (2004 [2002]), there has been a spread of vertical analyses, 'that follow a particularist reference logic… however, remaining sensitive to the specific uniqueness of the chosen cases' (Conde 1993: 206) and 'focusing on each subject separately' (Ghiglione and Matalon 1997). Unlike the case with Lahire's work, or that of Lewis (1970), many of the vertical analyses that have been undertaken are little more than dense and acritical descriptions of the interview. As Atkinson notes 'social scientists who extol the virtues of personal interviewing, and who base their research exclusively on such data, are in danger of recapitulating one of the key features of contemporary society rather than examining and analysing it' (2005: 206).

The various forms of qualitative material analysis, the 'holistic-content approach', the 'categorical-content' or 'content analysis' approach, the 'holistic-form' and the 'categorical form' (Cohler and Hostetler 2002: 560) are, in this way, underutilised at the same time as vertical content analysis has become excessively descriptive and dense, vulgarising and distorting its purpose. In sum, the 'biographical illusion' is an ally of the idea of the 'spokesperson' for minorities, for the excessive formalisation of methods and even of the growth of descriptive and dense vertical analysis. Some analytical methods and goals can (and should) mitigate these alliances.

Common denominators of the methodological paradigms

In the absence of a critical and historical reading of the evolution of scientific methods, social scientists have at times retreated into their comfort zones, with methodological barricades through to research methods that are often subject of not only operationalization but also of belief. Many of the 'exaggerations' of qualitative research are a consequence of this same methodological fundamentalism. The debate about the legitimacy and suitability of certain research methods is often tactically self-contained among peers. This mutual rivalry between quantitative and qualitative methods only encourages the construction of apparent differences between them. By constructing them through reciprocal negative references, the different paradigms (quantitative and qualitative) adopt more extreme analytical postures, falling prey more easily to interpretative and scientific fallacies. Thompson refers that: 'on the one hand, there are

well-funded survey researchers who manipulate their statistics as 'facts', interpreting them often with the insights of little more than commonsense hunches. … On the other hand are lone researchers who never have sufficient large numbers of interviews, or have drawn those interviews from sufficiently representative samples, to substantiate any of the hypotheses they may generate from the in-depth interviews which they carry out themselves, and who — in part reflecting a sense of impotence — often abandon any intention of interpreting society 'as it really is', instead shifting to post-modern or narrative approaches, in which the interview text replaces society as the focus of study. These two camps are reinforced by self-recruiting networks and by occasional outbursts of mutual hostility" (Thompson 2004: 238).

Temporality and the superiority of individual records are the two denominators that are common to these two paradigms, and which can even be extended to the 'mixed methods'. The successful combination of these two ingredients in the simultaneous utilisation of the life calendar and biographical interview, could also contribute to the 'Achilles' heel' of mixed methods: the comparability of data and of analysis.

As for the role of time phases, we can state that the 'biographical illusion' tends to be greater as the concern with the phases of research and of the collected data reduces. There are three time phases incorporated into the narratives: biographical time (the speed with which events are shared between the interviewee and the interviewer/researcher), research time (more relevant in relation to longitudinal research, where it relates to the time conducting field work) and analytical time (the time during which the data is analysed and interpreted) (McLeod and Thomson 2009: 146). However, the actual research design must also make demands from the methodological point of view. Sociological research can only begin to gain from making greater demands on the methodological temporality as a means of avoiding the 'biographical illusion' that, according to Bourdieu, questions the 'truth' and challenges the 'logic that is simultaneously retrospective and prospective', in order to take the 'consistency' and the 'constancy' from the biographical discourse (1997 [1993]: 54).

The manner in which the written register of the life history, using the tool for collecting common quantitative data during the semi-directed interview, is imposed on the discourse can undo the prior organisation (narrative, emotional, etc.) of life events in order to temporally reconstruct them. Thus, the utilisation of this written register does not seek to capture the 'coherent life experience as a unit and as a totality', 'as a totalising narrative', but rather it is precisely to deconstruct it: that is to temporally decompose it (Bourdieu 1997 [1993]: 55). This component of the script, in which the dimension of the written life history is introduced, is that around which the rest of the interview turns. The life calendar grid is, moreover, the 'trunk' of the conversation, and the episodes and events that happen during life are the 'branches'. Nevertheless, the script can also have other conversation topics (previous and/or posterior).

Concerning the superiority of individual records, Thomas and Znaniecki note that 'the superiority of life records over every other kind of material for the propose of sociological analysis appears with particular force when we pass from the characterisation of single data to the determination of facts, for there is no safer and more efficient way of finding among the innumerable antecedents of a social

happening the real causes of this happening than to analyse the past of the individuals through whose agency this happening occurred (1984 [1928]: 294–5). The superiority of qualitative methodologies in providing responses to some contemporary social processes does not exceed, however, the superiority of individual records as the primary material of sociological analysis. Becker also noted that the absence of highly detailed collected material is not the result of any scientific principle, but is simply due to the inability to enforce such an effort (Becker 1994: 192).

The methodology outlined in this article seeks precisely to demonstrate the fruitful combination of two superiorities or, if it is preferred, *forces* at the individual level. The *force* of the discursive reason, of reflection and of the intentionality of action for an understanding of the processes of constructing and reformulation of life projects; and the *force* of the individual records of the specifics of the individual sequences of all the relevant events, whether they be demographic, planned, external, turning or critical points, for an explanation of lived lives.
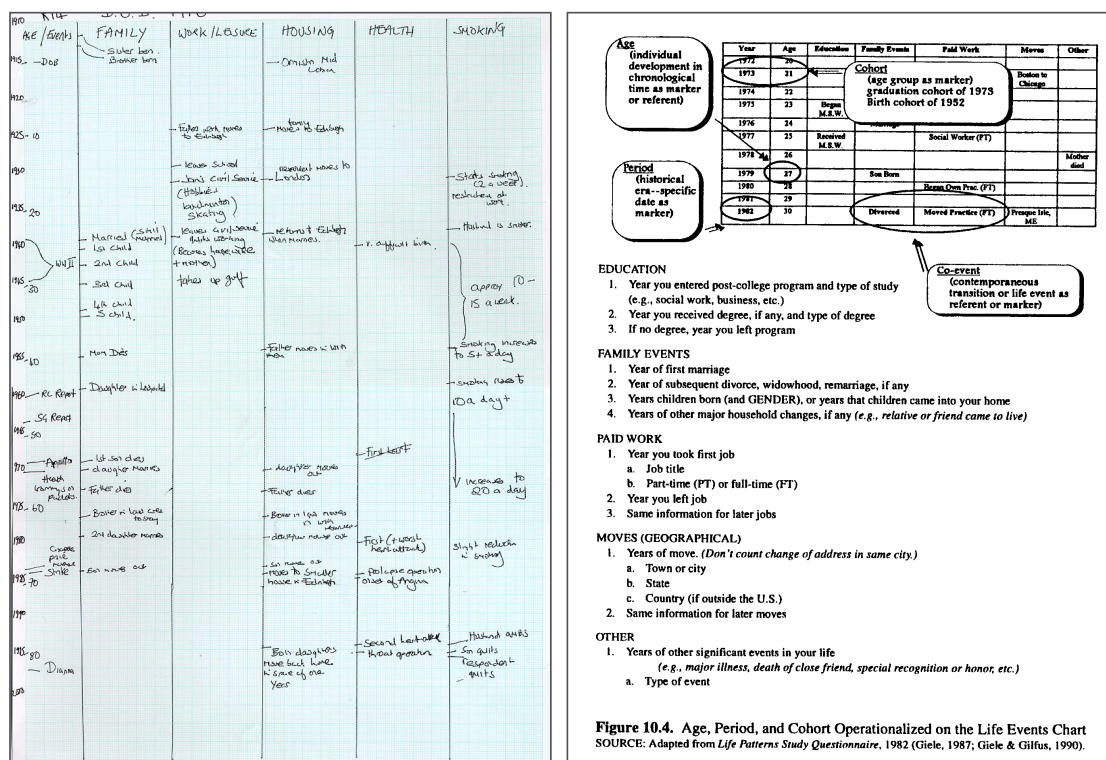
The life calendar and the biographical interview

In 1999, Parry, Thomson and Fowkes appealed for more research and publications that combined the completion of files of life histories and semi-directed interviews. They argued that this combination would lead to new forms of understanding and of presenting qualitative results (par 4.12). Until now, however, few studies have gone down that path. It is perhaps just one example of how qualitative and quantitative research often remain with their backs to each other. However, it is not the use of the life calendar, or the record of life histories *per se* that is not frequent (Glasner and Van de Vaart 2009 for a revision of the literature), but the combination of them with qualitative interviews of a biographical nature. The use of life calendar techniques is varied, and includes the life course perspective within the scope of sociology, epidemiology, family planning studies, health behaviour, sexual risk behaviour, domestic violence and studies into the treatment of illnesses (Glasner and Van der Vaart 2009: 333–5).

In fact, since the 1980s and the most determined development of the course of life perspective, 'that social scientists have come to incorporate the timing and the sequence of events of the life course in its research and analysis design' (Freedman et al. 1988: 38). In such cases, however, it was only used as a technique for the retrospective collection of information (Freedman et al. 1988; Van der Waart 2004; Glasner and Van der Vaart 2009), which came to improve the quality of the data collected and which was very useful for the development of demographics as a discipline (Hogan and Goldscheider 2002: 682). The format of the life calendars, which is intricate and encrypted and not very interviewee friendly, reveals the lack of interest in it as a task to be completed jointly by the interviewee and the interviewer. The need to combine this tool with qualitative interviews began to emerge in follow-up research (Freedman et al. 1999), particularly in the areas of medical sociology and medicine, and, finally, this tool began gaining fame and ground as the more adequate method for collecting information from elderly individuals (Parry, Thomson and Fowkes 1999; Wilson et al. 2007). This use of the method continued, nevertheless, to serve only quantitative purposes (Parry, Thomson and Fowkes 1999). The main advantages that

had been noted for the combination of these two techniques were (and are) predominantly unilateral. In this sense, the advantages pointed towards the way the personal interview and a script around the steering sheet events favours the quality of the data (quantitative data) that has been collected and recorded. It has been noted that the qualitative and personal questions raised serve only to complete the information sheet and to improve its consistency (Freedman et al. 1988: 50; Van der Vaart 2004); to stimulate the memory in order to minimise the lack of rigour that tends to characterise retrospectively collected data (Blane 1996: 751) and to take advantage of the life calendar's potential as an aide memoire (Berney and Blade 2003: 14; Freedman *et al*. 1988: 66; Parry, Thomson and Fowkes 1999; Glasner and van der Vaart 2009; Van der Vaart 2004). The introduction of the life grid has thus addressed the most frequently noted problem with the retrospective collection of data: the lack of rigor in the recollection of the data and in the sequence of events. As Blane notes: cross-referencing on the life grid enables subjects to improve the accuracy with which date are remembered… The life grid also appears to release detail from memory by juxtaposing different information from the same period of life.' (Blane 1996: 752).

However, the advantages of this combination of the life calendar and the biographical interview are bilateral to the extent that the introduction of the grid changes the dynamics of the biographical conversation, enriching and stimulating it, enabling, at the narrative level, 'top-down and parallel retrieval' (Glasner and Van der Vaart 2009: 336). It thereby enables the relationship between the individual experience and the identification of historical or individual key-moments; it improves the relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer/researcher, allowing a holistic understanding of the phenomenon by promoting the interdependence of the reports about the various events and allow a return to the events recounted at different moments during the interview (Parry, Thomson and Fowkes 1999). Additionally, it is further concluded that 'the written record of the life story, complemented by open interviews, can represent an enormous contribution to the study of youth, in which the biographical narratives have so much importance' (Wilson et al. 2007: 24). The format of the event file can be simple or it can be complex and can present some variations depending on the studies; however, its basis will remain relatively constant and transversal. The figures below clearly illustrate how the base variables are organised in columns and rows.

Figure 1: Examples of event files, life calendars and life history registers.
Sources: Parry *et al*. (1999) and Giele (1998).

The first column refers to the temporal metric, which generally contains the calendar year and age (Freedman et al. 1988: 51; Giele 1998; Parry, Thomson and Fowkes 1999; Blane 1996). The following columns generally refer to the more common demographic paths: school, vocational, marital, parental, etc.. We can and must include columns that contain data of specific interest to the research being carried out (past smoker, criminal, migratory, military, etc.). In this way the life history is a register of the chronology of the events and activities, combining data on education, profession, family and residence (Scott and Alwin 1998: 100). The option to disaggregate, or to 'decompose in order to better compose' (Pais 2001: 102), some paths[2] can enable the collection of information about events that are not only demographic, but which are also biographical, critical or turning points (or, in the words of Van der Vaart, Glasner and Belli [nd], personal landmarks). This will contribute to a 'different kind of research and theory than we are accustomed to' in the study of the 'conceptualisation of coincidence' and of studies into the turning points in life courses (Becker 1994: 183).

Despite the idea that the more professional and 'attractive' the event record is, the more positive the impact it will have in encouraging the interviewee to complete it (Freedman et al. 1988: 51); here, however, the argument is in favour of simplicity, which allies itself more easily to informal interaction. We also do not favour imposing a rigid order in the completion of the calendar, unlike Freedman et al. (1988) and Berney and Blade (2003), arguing that this reduces the chances of mistakes being made,

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[2] In fact, as Karweit and Kertzer noted, while in real life the spheres of education, professional occupation and family formation are interconnected, analytically it is very useful to disaggregate them (1998: 93).

thereby increasing the rigor of the data collected. In the research on which this article is based the goal was to allow the greatest possible fluidity for the discourse and space for the explanation of the relationships of interdependency between the different types of events, individual or external (Blane 1996: 752), allowing a communicative relationship between 'multiple frames of reference' (Van der Vaart 2004). The presence 'on the table' of the grid legitimates the return to topics that have been unexplored or to data that has not been registered, for which the scrupulous and inflexibly ordered completion of the form presents no advantage; indeed, much the reverse, it could actually prejudice the relationship and the interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer/researcher.

Additionally, the life calendar must be as comprehensible as possible to the interviewee, and for this reason the use of codes, abbreviations or sophisticated annotation techniques the respondent cannot understand must be avoided. All these small deviations from what is suggested in the literature relate to the fact that, to really obtain responses to questions of reflection, agency and intention, then the 'what', 'how' and 'why' questions must be accompanied with the 'when' questions at the same time, and not afterwards (Berney and Blade 2003).

The interaction between the *biographical narrative* and the *written life history record* is very profitable as a *combined* tool for the collection of biographical data. This dichotomy is synonymous with that initially proposed by Bertaux, which comprises the concepts of 'life story' and of 'life history'. As Clausen explains, it is simpler to call it 'life story' when it deals exclusively with the subjective and retrospective views the individual has of past experiences and of the importance of these experiences to them. Thus, a 'complete life history' must include the individual's testimonies as well as other data (Clausen 1998: 192). Thomson has also adopted the view that while the 'life story' is based on interview or 'composition',[3] the 'life history' is more analytical and based on other data and sources (2009: 20).

Therefore, to the extent that the history of events (demographic and/or critical) is recounted, the history of decisions, actions and, at times, of regrets is simultaneously told. In reality it is a journey to the four phases of an event or transition: the preparation, the occurrence, the adaptation (short-term reactions) and the stabilisation (long-term accommodation) (George 1993: 368). The life recounted is always, even in cases of interaction with the life lived, the past seen with the eyes of the present and the fruit of constructions in which the singular, social and historical are 'interlinked' (McLeod and Thomson 2009: 41). The subject is the carrier of their own history (Conde 1993b: 41). It is in this sense that the fact of their (version) of the history of their life is fraught with subjectivity that does not take away from the relevance of the analysis: rather, quite the reverse is true. 'Thomas' theorem' moreover strengthens this idea, stating that 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas and Znaniecky 1928: 572). The history an individual recounts may or may not be factually correct; however, this 'failure' is not crucial. What is crucial is that the researcher understands why the interviewee 'elaborates' certain responses (Miller 2007: 3).

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[3] Not used in the present study; indeed, this is a technique that is rarely used in Portugal.

The biographical-interpretative method is based precisely on the distinction between these two types of material that are referred to as the *life lived* and the *life recounted* (Wengraf 2000: 145). Unlike in the present research, in this case the data are analysed separately and only later are the results brought together. Nevertheless, there are many similarities between the analytical method used in this present research and the biographical-interpretative model describer by Wengraf. 'The life lived is composed of biographical data that can be extracted from interviews or other relevant sources. It is seen as a long, chronological sequence of "objective" historical facts in the life of the individual and of the life events that took place, independently of how they are described in the interview' (Wengraf 2000: 145). On the other hand, the 'life recounted is the way in which the individual presents themselves — as much an initial narrative as a response to specific questions — by selecting certain life events and omitting others, and to deal with them in one determined manner rather than another' (Wengraf 2000: 145). Uniting both these types of information using the biographical method in a more composite and less traditional manner permits the capture of life's 'alignments' and 'misalignments', challenging the individuals to fill in the 'silences', 'lacunae' and 'no responses' (Pais 2001: 87). Moreover, this combined method facilitates the analysis of three layers of information: the history of events, the accumulation of experiences and the assessment or interpretation of these experiences (Scott and Alwin 1998: 100-101). The data collected in this way can be examined through four different (or complementary) biographical analyses: the analysis of *holistic content*, of *thematic content*, of *holistic form* and of *category form* (Cohler and Hostetler 2002: 560).

Operationalising the 'mixed technique'

According to Plumer, 'no life story is simply that: a story. Instead it is built out of a series of social domains surrounding the life story-teller, the psychologist who is collecting the story, and the interaction between them' (1995, in Cohler and Hostetler 2002: 561). The material collected through the life calendar, but especially the causal and emotional explanation of the relationship between these events is the product of the interaction between the young adult and the interviewer/researcher. This interaction normally takes place in other biographical formats, which tend to 'require discussion and elaboration', making the final product — the narrative — a 'combined construction' (Clausen 1998: 187; see also Rustin 2002: 10). The biographical interviews become an opportunity for the individuals to 'reflect more on their lives and the direction they are taking, with an interested and impartial individual' (Henderson et al. 2009 [2007]: 166). However, the completion of the life grid implies additional, constant and dynamic cooperation between the interviewer/researcher and the interviewee. The interference of the grid during the interview, however, invites the interviewee to have a more active involvement than normal (Parry, Thomson and Fowkes 1999, par. 3.2; Freedman et al. 1988: 66).

To ensure the success of this methodology, it behoves the researcher to ensure: the relative physical proximity between themselves and the interviewee; and some caution in the introduction of the grid during the interview.

The physical proximity between the researcher/interviewer and the interviewee ensures the latter can see everything that is being written about him in the life calendars, which transmits confidence in the transparency of the 'interview contract' and in the rigor of the data record.[4] Also in the interest of transparency, the way in which the completion of the grid works, and the function of the event record, should be explained to the interviewee at the outset (which is also recommended by Parry, Thomson and Fowkes 1999: par 2.9). At no other moment in their lives will the interviewees be in a position where they can visualise a map of their real lives with their respective paths all duly recorded. Consequently a need, fed by the curiosity to see the final result, will emerge. This will incline the interviewees to register chronologically and accurately all of the important events in the 'life history', so that they can see their life course graphically represented. Parry, Thomson and Fowkes (1999) call this process 'entertaining challenge'.

On the other hand, it is just as important that the informality and flexibility of the tool for collecting 'interview' information is already established by the researcher/interviewer and that the interviewee recognises that the grid, when it is introduced, should be regarded as a pretext for continued conversation, and not as a motive for interrupting the discussion or as a means of disrupting the dynamic established until that moment. Thus, while the script of the semi-directed can predefine the order in which the conversation topics, and the grid, should be introduced, it must only respect this recommendation if the trust has been established by the time the moment the grid is introduced and the informality and flexibility of the conversation has already been established and put into practise.[5] By its nature, the grid can easily become a questionnaire or interview question that elicits little sympathy by those being 'interrogated'. For this reason it is essential that trust and the fluidity of the conversation are open at the moment the grid is introduced.

Conclusion: soothing temporality

The importance given to temporality in the research design can provide the researchers the opportunity to use alternative tools with which to avoid the 'biographical illusion' (Bourdieu 1997 [1993]), facilitated by the fascination with life histories, the traces of 'giving voice' to qualitative research, the illusion of objectivity promoted by the acritical use of CAQDAS and by the excessive use of 'vertical' content analysis that is driven by the biographical turn and the theory of individualisation.

There are essentially two ways through which the combination of the life calendar and the biographical interview can help avoid the biographical illusion; that is, to avoid the researcher's acritical fascination with the narrative coherence of their

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[4] As suggested by Parry, Thomson and Fowkes (1999).

[5] The record of events has a moment at which it enters into the conversation, and another when it leaves. This is only followed sparingly, so that the counsel of Freedman, who argues that switching between modes can confuse the interviewee and diminish the rapport and quality of recollection (Freedman *et al*. 1988: 50).

interviewee. These are: the reconstruction of the narrative, and the development of the analytical potential of the data (improving the quality of the collected data and increasing the diversity of graphical representation).

In the context of the 'interview society,' (Atkinson and Silverman 1997) in which the individuals already are accustomed, to different degrees according to their social characteristics, of offering coherent narratives of their lives, sociological research has an obligation to critically question the discursive versions provided. While it is important to recognise that 'if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences,' (Thomas and Znaniecky 1984 [1928]) it is also important to grant social scientists a greater role that that of the simple 'collector' of data, of the spokesperson for minorities or social activist, or that of the mere tool to *playback* the discussions that take place during interviews. There must, therefore, be methodologies designed or followed that allow the demanding and detailed collection of data on social trajectories that respect the sequence of events and the concrete and real chronology of the life course. The combination of the biographical interview and the life calendar is only one example of such alternative strategies.

This reconstruction is made through a narrative balance proposed by the combination of two techniques. On the one hand it proposes a holistic balance, with the interviewee being invited to recount his life in its various "fields", for example, school, family, residence, etc.. On the other hand, it proposes a balance between rigor (dates, order) and detail. This permits storing and analysing the events temporally and, especially, within a more correct causal chain. This also allows the analysis of the 'interdependence' and the sequence between demographic and non-demographic events, thus hindering the biographical coherence fabricated on the basis of the wrong sequencing of events, while at the same time it opens possibilities of analysis of the unpredictable and the 'accidental' turning points (Shanahan and Porfeli 2007). Only a methodology in which there is a place for the interviewee to freely recount non-demographic episodes that influenced the course of their life allows the posterior analysis of this same phenomenon; moreover, only the "complexity of the story testifies to the importance of the event"(Becker 1994: 186-8; see also Abbott 2001).

This 'mixed technique,' then, enables an improvement in the quality of objective information (over the timing and order of events) and of the subjective information (the *life told*) collected. The separate use of these two techniques results in the loss of a great deal of the analytical potential. To one life calendar without interviews can be associated dozens of different, even contradictory, life stories. Only the subjective narrative behind the history of events can cast light on the direction and intention of the action, giving a real sense, more easily and correctly interpreted by the researcher, of the life trajectory. On the other hand, a biographical interview without a life calendar often succumbs to the 'postulate of the meaning of the narrated existence' to which Bourdieu referred. Interviews present the life experience as a totalising narrative that is difficult for the researcher to deconstruct analytically.

Therefore, the joint application of the life calendar and biographical interview provides better objective information that, when reflected in a joint effort between the interviewee and the interviewer, and when understandable and transparent to the interviewee, and when its temporal coherence is confronted with subjective versions of the life lived (and recorded), thus passes through various 'quality control' mechanisms.

It allows the decomposition, and recomposition, of information (Pais 2001), whether by the interviewee during the interview or by the researcher during the analysis. Furthermore, it also permits the improvement of subjective information concerning the life course, allowing the association of the 'history of events' (in the life calendar) with the history of decisions, reflections and regrets. It also allows the reestablishment of an accurate temporal order of the life course, the coherence of which could be only, or largely, narrative. It allows for 'good stories' to happen not only 'to those who know how to tell them' (Henry James). The 'objective' and subjective data collected in this way can also provide a greater variety of analyses such as the 'holistic-content approach', the 'categorical-content', the 'holistic-form' and the 'categorical form' (Cohler and Hostetler 2002: 560), which also allows graphical representations that facilitate the definition and interpretation of trajectory typologies (see Nico 2011).

To conclude, alternative methods should be found in order to avoid the "biographical illusion" that Bourdieu has eloquently tried steer us clear of. Interviewees could then be explicitly invited to recount their life course in the correct order, so that we, as social scientists, can tell their story right.

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