

**Taking One Day at a Time: Temporal experiences in the context of unexpected life course transitions**

Fiona Shirani and Karen Henwood

Cardiff University

Accepted for Publication in *Time and Society*

**Introduction**

Although it would be inaccurate to suggest that time has been neglected in sociology (Nowotny, 1992) it is a frequently taken for granted presence, embedded in normalcy and thus escaping a critical gaze (Daly, 1996). The intangibility of temporal experience raises challenges for its study, yet everything people do is embedded and extended in time across the modalities of past, present and future (Adam and Groves, 2007) making it an inescapable aspect of our existence.

From a young age people are encouraged to project themselves into the realm of the 'not yet', as imagining the future is inextricably bound up with what it means to be human (Adam and Groves, 2007). Such future orientation involves planning and setting goals as people are chivied into a constant preoccupation with what comes next (Greene, 2003). Mead suggests that this uniquely human obsession with time reflects the self as a temporal process related to an understanding of ourselves as mortal (Flaherty and Fine, 2001). Whilst the 'not yet' of the future raises particular challenges for research, it has been suggested that people are continually engaged in creating the future, which influences their behaviour in the present (Daly, 1996). Giddens (1991) argues that individuals are engaged in reflexively organised life planning, preparing a course of future actions which he terms 'colonising the future'. The future is prepared in the present and may be 'known' through the actions and their effects that will bring it into being, transforming the future into the present (Bell and Mau, 1971; Adam, 2004). In this way the future does not become factual but appears knowable, although this perception is rarely attended to.

The future has been described as a terrain of possibilities, lending itself to invasion through counterfactual thought and risk calculation (Reith, 2004), where what could go wrong is disregarded on the grounds that it is so unlikely. As interactive selves, we assume that the future will be intelligent and ordered (Järvién, 2004), with individual trajectories organised according to perceptions of biographical certainty (Zinn, 2004). Future planning may be

unproblematic when lives unfold according to anticipated trajectories, yet unexpected events or 'fateful moments' (Giddens, 1991) represent a disruption to the life course (Charmaz, 1997), requiring people to re-think future projects (Holland and Thomson, 2009). Such experiences challenge an individual's ontological security, derived from a sense of continuity regarding one's life events, which has implications for personal identity (Giddens, 1991).

Previous research on life course disruptions has generally focussed on chronic illness (for example Bury, 1982; Charmaz, 1997, Hubbard et al., 2010; Reeve et al., 2010). Notable exceptions include research which considers the disruption caused by infertility (Webb and Daniluk, 1999; Exley and Letherby, 2001). These studies suggest that disruptions force individuals to revise imagined futures, and consider the implications this has for identity, yet often give little insight into the temporal processes of renegotiation. Whilst our data also suggest illness is experienced as a disruptive event, here we have chosen to focus on four experiences in the context of family formation: delayed conception; unplanned pregnancy; relationship separation and step-parenting to foreground the temporal strategies participants used for managing these disruptions. The events detailed in this paper are variously experienced as propelling men forward, preventing them from progressing, or regressing to a previous life phase, all of which can be difficult to integrate into anticipated life course trajectories based on a continuous time track of steady progress.

The persistence of a standardised life cycle has been variously supported (Elchardus and Smits, 2006) and contested (Neale and Flowerdew, 2003). Theories of individualisation have emphasised the erosion of traditional norms and the greater possibility for individual choice (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) which has been accompanied by an increase in uncertainty. This refutes the persistence of a standardised life course, suggesting trajectories are increasingly messy and non-linear. Although cultural standards around the timing and sequencing of life transitions remain influential, these are negotiated in relation to individual circumstances, making the life course increasingly contingent due to the decreasing predictability of events (Heinz and Krüger, 2001). Such an approach implies that relationship and family formation has become increasingly risky. However, research suggests that many individuals appear to disregard wider evidence of family instability (such as divorce statistics), denying they hold any relevance for their own situations (Lewis, 2006). In addition, some research suggests that individuals frame their life transitions as what they always assumed would happen (Webb and Daniluk, 1999; Lewis, 2006) rather than in terms of life choices and individual agency. This corresponds with what Zinn

(2004) describes as the traditionalisation mode of biographical certainty; traditionalised sequential patterns based on social norms where deviations are not anticipated. Similarly Daly (2002) delineates a strategy of formal temporal negotiation; a highly structured approach which emphasises control over time, corresponding with specific future trajectories. In contrast is an informal approach where planning is resisted and the flow of events dealt with as they occur, suggesting a less clear view of the future. By exploring deviation through unexpected events we hope to elucidate ongoing life course patterns (Maines and Hardesty, 1987) and consider the extent to which a normative life course model remains salient for this group of men.

It has been observed that reproductive health is seen as ‘women’s business’ (Earle and Letherby, 2007) and subsequently temporal accounts of family formation have tended to focus on women. In contrast, a linear approach to temporality has been described as ‘the essence of masculine experience’ (Daly, 1996:145) with gender differences in temporality particularly marked around the transition to parenthood. Masculine temporality has also been depicted as oriented towards achievement, progression, and preoccupation with the future (Maines and Hardesty, 1987; Daly, 1996; Odih, 1999). Here we consider how men deal with challenges to these imagined futures through the experience of unexpected life course events and the repercussions it has for their sense of temporality, whilst problematising gendered understandings of time.

### **Data**

The sample for this article comes from the Timescapes network ‘men as fathers’ study and a linked PhD project. Participants were recruited during their partner’s pregnancy to talk about their experiences of impending and actual fatherhood as part of a qualitative longitudinal study. The four unexpected events discussed in this paper were not part of the original research design but emerged over the course of the project. Further disruptive events were identified across the sample; such as serious health problems or death of a parent, but we have chosen to concentrate on four unexpected events related to family formation given the richness of our data around the transition to parenthood. In addition to present experiences, interviews explored the men’s reflections on their own childhoods and their anticipated futures. A group of thirty men from East Anglia were qualitatively interviewed in 2000 once before the birth of their first child and twice within the first year afterwards. Nineteen of these men were re-interviewed again in 2008 (sample A) the remaining eleven were not (sample B). A further fifteen men from South Wales were interviewed three times in 2008-9 as they made the transition to first time fatherhood

(sample C). The PhD sample was made up of eight men who had become fathers for the first time within the last year (sample D) aged under 22 or over 40. These groups provide a total sample of 53 men aged between 14 and 54 at the time of conception. Interviews were semi-structured, informed by a social constructionist understanding which situates participants as meaning makers (Warren, 2002), recognising that accounts are co-constructed during the interview encounter. The qualitative longitudinal design offers insights into the longer-term implications of life course events, particularly how anticipated futures are lived out, and the consequences if they are not realised. Thus the study can provide original insights into the longer-term implications of temporal disruption. The research was carried out by three different interviewers, which has raised important issues for our study, discussed in-depth elsewhere (Shirani, 2010).

In this paper we have selected data extracts from across all samples at different points in time to illustrate the prevalence of the issues discussed across our data set. The data have been read as ‘told stories’; the narrated personal life told through conversation (Squire, 2008). The data presented therefore highlight the men’s interpretations of their experiences, reflecting our social constructionist informed interviewing approach grounded in participants’ understandings. The QLL aspect of this study also provides opportunity for insight into how these told stories relate to ‘lived lives’ (Squire, 2008) over time.

### **Delayed conception**

Eight men across the samples reported a delay in conception due to fertility difficulties, ranging from one to ten years, and all had experienced some form of medical intervention regarding fertility. When asked about fertility, all men suggested that the problem lay with their partner, or that there was no medical reason that they had not conceived. Had any of the participants reported male infertility it may be that a different understanding of temporality in relation to this would have been reached.

Parenthood is frequently assumed as a life course stage that will be achieved when intended, and remains a signifier of adulthood. Consequently childlessness affects individual and wider societal perceptions of an appropriate life course, and has to be accounted for in a way that parenthood does not (Exley and Letherby, 2001). In our study, the couple’s apparent inability to conceive led to a very different relationship to time in comparison to those in the wider sample who had conceived when anticipated. Across the sample men described women’s reproductive bodies as constrained by time (Earle and

Letherby, 2007) and saw their partners' biological clocks as limiting the window in which conception could occur. In contrast, the men did not appear to perceive that they had any reproductive time limit. This is illustrated by some of their comments about the decision to conceive, emphasising biological time in relation to their partner such as '*time is running out for her*' or '*she was a bit worried that her "clock" was starting to tick*' and '*for me it wasn't a case of time running out whereas for her you start to worry*'.

Those who experienced pregnancy when intended described this occurring at the right stage in their lives, which contributed to a sense of progression. In contrast, when conception was delayed it gave the sense of stalling, arousing feelings of lack of control over time. With increasing alienation from bodily time there is an assumption it can be controlled, freeze-framing childbearing through the use of contraceptives. Experiencing this as no longer controllable can come as a significant jolt (Menzies, 2000). Most men assumed that conception would occur within a few months, and when this did not happen, concerns about time running out intensified. For couples who experienced a delay in conception, time became a dominant feature of everyday life; a countdown until they could access results or try again. This emphasises the couples' planning in relation to socially constructed clock time.

Erm, you know, trying to reassure her that everything was probably normal and it would happen, and really trying to say, "Well, we've only got two weeks to wait and then we can sort of try again and then another two weeks after that we'll know". So trying to sort of put some hope on the subject because I was getting less and less convinced that it was going to happen. (Vincent, 30<sup>i</sup>, sample A, pre-birth)

Here Vincent's life is marked by a process of chronometricalization or microtiming (La Rossa and Sinha, 2006) broken down into smaller chunks of time, in this case related to fertility cycles and biological time. During periods of apparent infertility the men often felt that they had to be strong and supportive for their partners, who found it difficult to wait until the medically defined right time to intervene. Vincent's strategy of looking forward attempts to inject hope into the situation by focussing on how little time there is until the possibility of conception. However, he refrains from looking too far ahead as this acts as a reminder of biological time limits and perceptions of time running out. This period of waiting and expectancy is a temporality that forms part of everyday living (Adam, 1990) as daily life becomes centred on monthly cycles. In this situation, time also threatens personal identity against normative life course expectations (Earle and Letherby, 2007) as the ticking biological clock serves as a reminder that the window for achieving the life course status of

parenthood is apparently diminishing. Inability to conceive was problematic for the men in the present due to teasing between friends or colleagues, often reflected on as upsetting or troubling, which intensified pressure to conceive.

Across the sample, men implied that peers having children was an indicator that they should be doing the same. They were keen not to be left behind in single life, feeling that friends' ability to cope with fatherhood suggested they should be able to do the same.

When you see other people with their kids and they're coping you're like "you're a year younger than me, perhaps I should think about getting on with it really" so yeah it is, your friends do influence that ... people start having kids and you want them, it's like "for God's sake" it's like a competition, not so much between men but you notice that between the girls, it's kind of "oh bloody cow, she's bloody pregnant before I am" ... I think it puts a lot of pressure on the wife whereas as the man you've just got to be supportive and kind of "yeah come on love, it'll happen one day" ... So yeah that did put a bit of pressure on us. (Joe, 31, sample C, pre-birth)

Joe reiterates Vincent's suggestion that it is the man's role to be supportive in these situations, yet also indicates that he felt under pressure that the couple conceive in order to keep up, with a feeling of relief when conception occurred and temporal pressure was alleviated. Joe engages with the future as he assures his wife that 'it'll happen one day', attempting to move the focus from the time it may take to achieve their goal towards the definite achievement of pregnancy on the horizon. The pressure Joe talks about lasted for several years for some of the men, which influenced their feelings about fatherhood; becoming deterred or increasingly invested in achieving parenthood.

Participants who had experienced a delay in conceiving were the most conscious about their age, expressing concerns about being too old for fatherhood. These concerns about aging were related to perceptions of health and fitness as it was seen as an important father role to engage in active play with the child.

I do regret being a bit old for him. If I was a bit younger I would be more active and out doing more adventurous things with him but, you know, my knees hurt and, you know, things are hurting and falling off and things and, I, you know, I'm not quite so physically active with him as I would like to be. (Terry, 46, sample A, 8 years later)

This delay may also result in potential life course collisions at a later stage – such as retirement and children going to university – which could present financial difficulties (Nguyen, 2004). Older fathers indicated some resistance to thinking about the long-term future, as concerns about their age would be magnified.

I don't want to look ahead (amusement) because certain things seem like, seems ancient looking ahead to years to come when he's ten, that's a bit daunting. (Lawrence, 54, sample D, post-birth)

Delayed conception is temporally problematic for these participants by contradicting assumed life course plans and highlighting individuals' lack of control over time. Raising a barrier to achieving an anticipated life status on schedule challenges personal identity and imagined futures. A process of chronometricalization enabled the men to move forward through clock and calendar time whilst minimising the threat to reaching their desired identity by focusing on the short-term future. Such an approach to temporality continued as the men resisted thinking about the long-term implications of their advanced age at conception.

### **Unplanned pregnancy**

Unplanned pregnancy can disturb anticipated chronological progression of the life course, experienced as interference and potentially creating family forms which differ from the individual's ideal (Daniels and Weingarten, 1983; Earle and Leatherby, 2007). A third of participants across the samples experienced unplanned pregnancies, with circumstances of these varying widely as the temporal disruption this brought about was mediated by the men's age and life course phase. In addition to significant adjustment of their present lifestyles, men who experienced an unplanned pregnancy were forced to re-evaluate their future plans.

When describing the moment they found out about the pregnancy, all men talked in terms of 'shock', although the most extreme reactions came from the youngest fathers. That these pregnancies were described as a surprise suggests that a time norm has been violated (Daly, 1996); something happened which was not in the men's anticipated life trajectories. As with Edley and Wetherell's study (1999), the majority of young men had thought they would become fathers at some point in the future but did not have a clear idea as to when this would happen. They all felt that they were currently too young for fatherhood and would have preferred to wait for a few years until they were older, more stable and more

mature. Several also felt that their own lives were over now that they had the responsibility for another person; as pregnancy was perceived as a negative event that could prevent achievement of specific life goals (Corkindale *et al.*, 2009). The quotes below suggest that the life ahead these young men had imagined suddenly became inaccessible with the disruption of an unplanned pregnancy.

I was stunned... once I saw the two little blue lines come up I thought "oh my God my life's over" (Craig, 20, sample B, pre-birth)

I was 14, still in school and I just didn't think I was ready for a baby, just too young ... and too much life ahead of me, didn't want to have kids yet until I was older, tie me down and things like that (Aaron, 15, sample C, post-birth)

Across the sample youth was viewed as a period of the life course to pursue one's own interests, have fun and be selfish. The young fathers felt that they no longer had the opportunity to do these things as they had to grow up quickly for the sake of the child, evoking a sense of being propelled forward to what they imagined as a future life course stage, magnified through a contrast with childless peers. Young men expressed concerns about this propulsion radically altering their lifestyle; several were concerned about possible isolation, with fears that their friends would treat them as 'outcasts' if they could no longer partake in the same social activities. Whilst some young men continued with their education and work plans as best they could in restricted financial circumstances, others were forced to revise their expectations drastically as they were faced with the immediate need to provide for the child.

I started working at [factory], it was probably the worst job I've ever had in my life. And then you get the feeling sinks in you know of I could be doing this for the rest of my life because I've gotta provide for this child until the child's at least sixteen/seventeen/eighteen you know what I mean? And then by then I'd be old, I've still got no qualifications, I've still got none of this, the only experience I've ever had is when I was working in [factory]. ... It's great being a dad but there's still always that thought in the back of your head and there will always be probably till the day I die 'what would have happened if I hadn't have had...?' (Owen, 18, sample D, post-birth)

Here Owen reflects on the difficulties of unplanned young fatherhood, which for him has meant being trapped in low-status employment. He fantasises about the future he originally imagined and could possibly have achieved if he had not become a father.

In dealing with the significant life changes they experienced, young men indicated a short-term focus. For example Johnny and his partner had given little thought to how they would combine work and parenthood, suggesting that they would have to deal with these challenges when they arose. This contrasts with those men who experienced planned pregnancies, where there was a high level of planning and discussion of these issues beforehand.

Essentially we've not thought about that yet, but within the next few months we're gonna have to be starting to think and then plan, I suppose just work out how it is going to work. And then it'll happen and we'll probably change our minds and think of something else (amusement) 'cause it blatantly won't work.  
(Johnny, 22, sample D, post-birth)

Two fathers in the oldest section of the sample also experienced unplanned pregnancies, assuming that at this stage in their lives they had passed the opportunity for parenthood. At 47 Phillip had imagined a future without children until discovering that his partner was pregnant. They decided to continue with the pregnancy, revising future plans for travel in favour of settling locally. Becoming a father at this stage in life was described as a 'huge undertaking'.

[I'm] Still quite scared, still quite scared by the long-term implications. But dealing with it on a day-by-day basis, trying to get as much out of it as I can on a day-by-day basis. Um exploring it, it's a (pause) it's something I'm sure as each day passes I'm slightly more at ease with, slightly more pleased about. But yeah it's still a huge undertaking, still a big change. (Phillip, 47, sample D, post-birth)

In order to deal with the significant changes fatherhood has brought about for his current and future life, Phillip describes living with fatherhood on a 'day-by-day basis' rather than trying to plan longer-term. Phillip had concerns about the future, particularly having to provide for a dependent child at a time when he had hoped to reduce work due to ill-health, so dealing with the short-term future enabled him to avoid feeling overwhelmed by the more far-reaching implications. Phillip had few friends with children and those who did were often parents to teenagers or older children. As with the young fathers, not knowing anyone in a similar situation led to feelings of isolation, which had a significant effect on the experience of fatherhood.

Unplanned pregnancies presented a dramatic temporal interruption to life plans, negotiated differently depending on the men's stage in the life course. Those who experienced unplanned pregnancies in their thirties could more easily reconcile this within their life plans, as it fitted into a phase when friends and siblings were in a similar position. In contrast, younger and older fathers faced isolation due to being out of sync with their contemporaries. For all fathers, impending parenthood required some adjustment to future plans in order to settle down and provide for the child, both financially and by devoting time. Younger fathers described being propelled forward into a life stage they had not anticipated reaching for several years, as they were forced to grow up quickly for the sake of the child. In contrast, older fathers described a return to a stage they felt had been passed. Again these men adopted a strategy of chronometricalization; describing taking things 'day-by-day' to avoid being overwhelmed by longer-term implications of having to make such drastic revisions to their imagined futures.

### **Separation**

Divorce has been highlighted by previous research as an unexpected life course event (Exley and Letherby, 2001; Zinn, 2004) and four men across the sample experienced relationship separation within the early years of their child's life. These men had been in relationships of at least two years duration, one man was married and the rest cohabiting. All children lived with their mothers post-separation and all were boys.

The four men expressed initial feelings post-separation about not knowing what to do next now their lives were no longer taking shape as planned.

I have been utterly devastated by it all, and I don't know where to go or what direction to take. ... And um I have just started a new life really, my whole life revolved around the family there. That is why it is so difficult to suddenly think of anything else really. ... So it is literally taking one day at a time and that frustrates me, but that is the only way really to take one day at a time. (Adam, 35, sample A, post-birth)

Separation brought about huge life changes in the present for these men, as well as making the futures they had anticipated no longer obtainable. As Adam's quote illustrates, the separated fathers were reluctant to plan much further ahead, preferring to focus on the short-term by thinking one day at a time to deal with the sense of loss they experienced. As with the delayed fathers, this chronometricalization strategy enabled participants to manage the uncertainty of the future without becoming too overwhelmed. Here Adam and Gary

reflect on how they think in short segments of time to deal with not seeing their sons; setting these milestones was a way of breaking down the time until they could have contact with their children again. They avoided thinking about the future as it had become unclear; often taking a long period to adjust to the fact that life would not pan out as they had anticipated.

But if I think ahead too much I don't see it, and I know that if I just let go of looking too far ahead ... I am more likely to be able to see a future if I don't rush to get one. I can't see a future, not at the moment, but I know that there must be one there, and sometimes I feel that it won't ever come. ... You just do just take one day at a time  
(Adam, 35, sample A, post-birth)

It's little things, I sort of set meself little steps and milestones really to stop myself going under really, in terms of the fact I wasn't seeing my son every day. And I think that's really, that's worked quite well,  
(Gary, 36 sample A, 8 years later)

All fathers across the sample reiterated the importance of spending quality time with their children, however separated fathers tended to attach greater importance to this, particularly emphasising their significance as male role models for sons. These men adopted the discourse of new fatherhood based on involvement, highlighting the importance of the father as an active presence in his child's life (Collier and Sheldon, 2006).

Separated fathers were confronted with a sense of regression as they felt they were moving back to a previous life phase. Three of the men returned to live with their own parents initially, mainly for financial reasons, before looking for a home of their own as they had done several years before. In addition, they had moved from having a family to bachelorhood, yet at this time in their lives they no longer wanted a single life but sought the status of a family. To compound this sense of regression, most of the men were out of sync with their peers, who were embedded in their own family lives.

A lot of my teens and twenties like a lot of blokes it was "oh look fun fun fun" and then you do feel those avenues are closed off once you've got the house and the family and the child. So when you suddenly are back in a bachelor lifestyle, it was strange ... Society looks at you differently but then society looks back at you as if, how they did four/five years previously ... You're just a bloke living on his own (amusement) ... So whereas I was out of sync to start with, you're then out of sync in a different kind of way (Gary, 36, sample A, 8 years later)

Separation was a significant turning point in the life courses of a minority of men, one which did not figure as an anticipated goal. As with the delayed fathers, this was problematised in terms of anticipated linear progression. In the early stages post-separation the men dealt with the huge change in circumstances by taking things one day at a time, so they did not become too overwhelmed by their significant life changes. Several years after the separation had occurred some men were still using this one day at a time strategy as the experience of a separation had diminished confidence in their own judgements and capabilities, coming to feel that planning for the future is valueless (Giddens, 1991), therefore it was seen as imprudent to put too much emphasis on the long-term future, as the extract from Gary indicates.

I like thinking about the future in a wishy-washy sort of way, but in terms of specifics like I've just talked about I don't like thinking about it. Well whether it's building up for a fall or superstition or what I don't know. I like thinking of daft things that are happening in the future but not anything that sort of related specifically to me.  
(Gary, 36, sample A, 8 years later)

This orientation was in stark contrast to those whose lives had unfolded according to anticipated trajectories as this bolstered perceptions of biographical certainty, meaning long-term planning continued and was often extended.

### **Step-parenting**

Four men across the sample experienced step-parenting; two with a primary school age child, and two with adolescents. The experience of stepfathers varied significantly depending on the age of the children, yet there was a sense from all the men of being propelled forward into an existing family life. Whilst the men talked about taking relationships slowly to protect the children, there was not the same period of adjustment to parenthood as provided by the pregnancy, or by beginning to parent with a baby, as immediately they were required to be parents to a child or teenager, which they had not imagined doing for several years.

I think that their ages are quite significant in that Jess is a fourteen year old child, she doesn't want, she is so independent really. I mean they are mini adults already ... I kind of miss out on that kind of that kind of innocence I suppose really. (Adam, 34, sample A, pre-birth)

Here Adam reflects on not being present for the period of innocence he associates with early childhood, instead being confronted with 'mini adults' who needed a different kind of parental involvement, which he felt unsure how to provide. The boundaries between childhood and adulthood were less clear for teenagers and the men were unsure of what their relationship should be. Whilst those with younger step-children had made significant adjustments to their life course plans by moving in with an existing family, a young child was easier to reconcile with their ideas of what parenthood involved. In contrast, those with older stepchildren referred to them as their partner's children and did not feel comfortable taking on a similar fatherly role. This supports previous research which suggests that younger children adjust better to their mother's re-partnering, whilst among older children, daughters may be particularly resistant (Hetherington and Henderson, 1997). The men used time to highlight their fatherly relationship with stepchildren; contrasting their experiences with biological fathers who saw their children infrequently. Stepfathers emphasised that being there for day-to-day life with the child was what constituted a 'real' father, contrasting with separated fathers' emphasis on short bursts of quality time.

In all four of these cases the men's partners were several years older and keen to have another child before it was 'too late' out of concern about ticking biological clocks. As there were already children in the relationship there was no apparent reason to delay parenthood; they were already parenting. In these situations, transition to biological parenthood often happened earlier in the relationship than where step-children were not present. However, all of the men said that they would have preferred to have waited longer until they felt more settled into their new way of life.

Yes, the decision, the way it was - me partner, Lynn, is 38 years old. Like I said, we've been together like four years or more. She felt her biological clock was ticking, and she wanted another child. ... I haven't got a problem with Lynn wanting a child. It's just, in my mind, it's do it a bit more, planned a bit more correctly ... But, no, she was the one who wanted to push it through quicker, (Malcolm, 32, sample A, pre-birth)

All four men experienced some relationship difficulties post-birth; it appears that asynchrony in timing decisions was more problematic for relationships than transitions experienced as unexpected by both (Cowan and Cowan, 2009).

The sense of being propelled forward and things going quickly prompted these men to also adopt a day-by day approach. Here Malcolm suggests he lives his life focussing on the short-term emergent present rather than the future.

I don't think I should really worry about the future. I think I should worry about what's going to be happening next, d'you know what I mean? ... I just think, every day as it comes and go from there  
(Malcolm, 32, sample A, pre-birth)

### **Conclusions**

By foregrounding the experience of those whose temporal trajectories have taken an unexpected turn, we consider how normative life course expectations and personal identity can be threatened by time. We have also emphasised timing and asynchrony as particularly significant to experiencing an event as problematic. The four situations represent unexpected life course events which brought about temporal disruption to existing life trajectories variously experienced as propelling the men forwards, imposing a pause, or regressing to a previous life course phase. These events or 'fateful moments' all represent a challenge to conventional notions of linear progression, signifying a crossroads in existence that required the re-thinking of future projects (Giddens, 1991; Holland and Thomson, 2009).

These unanticipated events confronted men with their lack of control over timing, raising issues about conceptions of biographical certainty. Most of the men appeared to follow what Zinn (2004) terms the traditionalization mode of biographical certainty, where futures are planned according to specific time horizons and unexpected events are not envisaged, therefore when they do occur these events are experienced as catastrophe or crisis. This is implied in our data in the way the men represented their experiences through language of 'tragedy' and 'devastation' when the unanticipated event occurred. These unexpected changes are represented as a threat to ontological security, with longstanding impacts for personal identity in relation to anticipated futures. Marris (1972) invokes the concepts of grief and bereavement to explain how individuals deal with loss of certainty in various life events, such as the breakdown of a relationship. As we are always preparing for the future, individuals may experience similar feelings of loss and disruption if these futures become uncertain. This paper has illustrated how the collapse of these men's imagined identities (Finn and Henwood, 2009) based on their anticipated futures created

loss of certainty, leading to disorientation of purpose and emerging anxiety (Marris, 1972; Salecl, 2004).

Isolation from the security of their anticipated temporal trajectory made thinking about the future problematic, as it no longer appeared predictable. This meant that the men often adjusted to focussing on meeting short-term expectations and avoiding the comprehensive provision required in long-term planning. As Charmaz notes (1997:35-35) *'When people feel overwhelmed by the enormity of crisis, they handle it in small pieces by concentrating on the details ... images of the future remain vague and elusive.'* Adopting a chronometricalization strategy of focussing on short-term milestones enabled the men to feel that they were making some progress, without feeling pressurised by long-term concerns. Across the four events, such an approach is illustrated as a common experience for dealing with uncertainty produced by biographical disruption, regardless of the temporal direction the men felt they had taken. Speaking to some of the men several years after the event had occurred, it appeared that this 'day-by-day' approach had become a long-term strategy, as the experience had highlighted the futility of future planning since they could never know what to expect. Previous research suggests that life course interruptions can be experienced as a temporary period in the present whilst the future remains unaltered (Charmaz, 1997), yet our data suggest that the interruptions themselves may be temporary but require significant adjustment of anticipated futures, giving rise to new temporal understanding. This paper therefore expands on existing research in relation to biographical disruption by using a temporal lens to illustrate individual processes to renegotiate imagined futures.

That the disruption caused by an unanticipated life course event was experienced as a rupture of existing life course plans highlights the normative trajectories which most of the men had assumed they would follow. Those in the wider sample who followed their anticipated life trajectory on target experienced this as confirmatory, providing a sense of comfort, achievement and progression. This bolstered perceptions of biographical certainty and control over time, instilling confidence in the ability to plan long-term. In contrast, challenges to anticipated trajectories were disruptive and unsettling, representing the uncontrollability of time and giving the men a sense of being out of sync with their peers. Whilst there is some variation in the life course men expected to follow, commonalities were overwhelming, suggesting that notions of a standardised life course apparently persist for this group. As Townsend (2002:49) notes; *'each varying performance of the script helps establish the underlying melody as standard'*. The persistence of standardised

trajectories holds implications for debates about individualisation, as it appears that many individuals do not describe their life trajectories in terms of choice, but assumptions of following traditional norms. In the light of debates about increasing life course fragmentation and contingency, it raises questions as to why some individuals continue to feel able to project life course trajectories according to biographical certainty. It may be that this is an approach particularly relevant to white middle-class men (Felski, 2000), however this class distinction appears unsubstantiated both in the wider literature (Bergmann, 1992) and our own research.

In this paper we have referred to a linear sense of temporality based on achievement and progression, suggested elsewhere to be a particularly masculine orientation towards time (Daly, 1996; Odih, 1999). Whilst those men whose trajectories remain uncontested may continue to invest in linear strategies, men who have experienced a challenge to the certainty of this appear to readjust temporal focus to centre on the present and short-term future, with more of an emphasis on making the most of 'now'. Participants themselves perceived a linear time-track and long-term future orientation to be a masculine approach to temporality, which they distinguished from their partners' short-term focus. However we emphasise that this is the participants' understanding and would question the notion that women do not engage in similar strategies. Numerous researchers have drawn conclusions about men's time as linear and women's as polychronic or relational, yet there is limited empirical support for this (Daly, 1996). Others have problematised the distinction between female formlessness and male linearity, suggesting linearity and repetition permeate the lives of both men and women (Felski, 2000). Under an ideology that emphasises success, the future takes on greater importance as it requires planning and accomplishment, which we would suggest is relevant to both men and women.

Throughout the discussion we have illustrated the challenges of dealing with unexpected events for those with a linear view of temporality, which rests on an assumption of life course continuity (Maines and Hardesty, 1987). Using a symbolic interactionist perspective, Daly (2002) describes a continuum from formal to informal negotiations about time, reflecting the degree to which individuals wish to control the future. A formal approach to temporal negotiation is highly structured, and control over time is cherished. In contrast, others take an informal approach and are preoccupied with coping with present events, having no illusions about their ability to plan or control the future. These individuals do not attempt to seize control with planning activity but deal with temporal challenges as they occur. Whilst this paper has focussed on those who plan for the long-

term future, other individuals in the sample who adopted an informal approach experienced much less anxiety when dealing with an unexpected event. In these situations, there was less concern about failing to meet goals, as these had never been firmly established. Presenting a long-term future orientation as laudable perhaps overlooks the significant effect that disruption to these plans can bring to bear on how people experience their lives.

The centrality of the future in our lives is often not reflected in research, as it is depicted as open and empty, the realm of possibilities, which raises challenges for its study. However our data suggest that participants frequently have clearly defined anticipated trajectories, with significant ruptures when these imagined futures cannot be realised. Whilst the future is not empirically accessible, we can consider ‘images of the future’ that is, the future transported into the present (Adam, 2004). The future is not empty, instead it casts both light and shadow on the present, changing the way the world appears to us (Groves, 2007). By accounting for the future as a fundamental aspect of life course experiences, we illustrate the importance of making time explicit as a tool for understanding experiences of family formation and fateful moments.

---

<sup>i</sup> Names have been replaced with pseudonyms. Age cited is at time of interview, therefore varies between extract

## **Note**

We extend our thanks to the ESRC for funding the original study and refunding it as part of the Timescapes network (award numbers RO22250167 and RES 347 25 0003). In addition we would like to thank Professor Barbara Adam for her comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. We are also indebted to the men who participated in this study for sharing their experiences.

## **References**

Adam, B. (1990) Time and Social Theory. Cambridge: Polity

---

Adam, B. (2004) Briefing 4: Towards a New Sociology of the Future. Briefing from ESRC Professorial Fellowship 'In Pursuit of the Future' Available at <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/futures/briefings.html>

Adam, B. and Groves, C. (2007) Future Matters: Action, Knowledge, Ethics. Boston and Leiden: Brill

Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1995) The Normal Chaos of Love. Cambridge: Polity

Bell, W. and Mau, J.A. (eds) (1971) The Sociology of the Future. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Bergmann, W. (1992) The Problem of Time in Sociology: An overview of the literature on the state of theory and research on the 'Sociology of Time', 1900-82. Time and Society 1 (1) pp81-134

Bury, M. (1982) 'Chronic illness as biographical disruption'. Sociology of Health and Illness 4(2) pp167-182

Charmaz, K. (1997) Good Days, Bad Days: The Self in Chronic Illness and Time. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press

Collier, R. and Sheldon, S. (2006) "'Fathers" rights, fatherhood and law reform – international perspectives'. In Collier, R. and Sheldon, S. (eds) Fathers' Rights Activism and Law Reform in Comparative Perspective. OR: Hart Publishing

Corkindale, C. Condon, J. Russell, A. and Quinlivan, J. (2009) Factors that adolescent males take into account in decisions about an unplanned pregnancy. Journal of Adolescence. 32 pp995-1008

Cowan, P. and Cowan, C. (2009) News You Can Use: Are Babies Bad for Marriage? A Research Update from the Council on Contemporary Families. University of Illinois, Chicago. January 9<sup>th</sup>

---

Daly, K. (1996) Families and Time: Keeping Pace in a Hurried Culture. California: Sage

Daly, K. (2002) Time, Gender and the Negotiation of Family Schedules. *Symbolic Interaction*. 25(3) pp323-342

Daniels, P. and Weingarten, K. (1983) *Sooner or Later: The Timing of Parenthood in Adult Lives*. New York: W.W. Norton

Earle, S. and Leatherby, G. (2007) 'Conceiving Time? Women who do or do not conceive'. *Sociology of Health and Illness* 29(2) pp233-250

Edley, N. and Wetherell, M. (1999) "Imagined futures: Young men's talk about fatherhood and domestic life" *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 38(2) pp181-194

Elchardus, M. and Smits, W. (2006) 'The Persistence of the Standardized Life Cycle'. *Time and Society* 15(2/3) pp3-326

Exley, C. and Letherby, G. (2001) 'Managing a Disrupted Lifecourse: Issues of Identity and Emotion Work'. *Health* 5(1) pp112-132

Felski, R. (2000) *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*. New York :NY University Press

Finn, M. and Henwood, K. (2009) Exploring masculinities within men's identificatory imaginings of first-time fatherhood. *British Journal of Social Psychology*. 48 (3) pp547-562

Flaherty, M.G. and Fine, G.A. (2001) Present, Past, and Future: Conjugating George Herbert Mead's perspective on time. *Time and Society*. 10 (2/3) pp147-161

Giddens, A. (1991) Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Later Modern Age. Cambridge: Polity.

---

Greene, S. (2003) The Psychological Development of Girls and Women: Rethinking Change in Time. London: Routledge

Groves, C. (2007) The Living Future in Philosophy. Working Paper Available at [http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/futures/wp\\_cg\\_livingfuture121005.pdf](http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/futures/wp_cg_livingfuture121005.pdf)

Heinz, W. and Krüger, H. (2001) Life Course: Innovations and Challenges for Social Research. Current Sociology. 49(2) pp29-45

Hetherington, E.M., & Henderson, S.H. (1997). Fathers in stepfamilies. In M.E. Lamb (ed.), The Role of the Father in Child Development (3rd ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Holland, J. and Thomson, R. (2009) 'Gaining perspective of choice and fate: Revising critical moments'. European Societies 11(3) pp1-19

Hubbard, G. Kidd, L. and Keaney, N. (2010) Disrupted lives and threats to identity; The experiences of people with colorectal cancer within the first year following diagnosis. Health 14(2) pp131-146

Järvién, M. (2004) Life Histories and the Perspective of the Present. Narrative Inquiry. 14 (1) pp45-68

La Rossa, R. and Sinha. C. (2006) 'Constructing the Transition to Parenthood'. Sociological Inquiry 76(4) pp433-457

Lewis, J. (2006): Perceptions of risk in intimate relationships. Journal of Social Policy, 35, 1, 39-58.

Maines, D. R. and Hardesty, M. J. (1987) 'Temporality and Gender: Young Adults' Career and Family Plans'. Social Forces 66(1) pp102-120

Marris, P. (1974) Loss and Change. London: Routledge

---

Menzies, H. (2000) 'Cyberspace Time and Infertility: Thoughts on Social Time and the Environment'. Time and Society 9(1) pp75-89

Mills, M. (2000) 'Providing Space for Time: The Impact of Temporality on Life Course Research'. Time and Society 9(1) pp91-127

Neale, B. and Flowerdew, J. (2003) 'Time, texture and childhood: the contours of longitudinal qualitative research'. International Journal of Social Research Methodology 6 (3) pp189-199

Nguyen, K. 'The Timing of Fatherhood and Age at Retirement: On Becoming Fathers Later in Life and Delaying Labour Force Exit'. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco CA Aug 14 2004 ([http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p110210\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p110210_index.html))

Nowotny, H. (1992) 'Time and Social Theory: Towards a social theory of time'. Time and Society 1(3) pp421-454

Odih, P. (1999) 'Gendered Time in the Age of Deconstruction'. Time and Society 8(1) pp9-38

Reeve, J. Lloyd-Williams, M. Payne, S. and Dowrick, C. (2010) Revisiting biographical disruption: Exploring individual embodied illness experience in people with terminal cancer. Health. 14(2) pp178-195

Reith, G. (2004) 'Uncertain Times: The notion of 'risk' and the development of modernity'. Time and Society 13(2/3) pp383-402

Salecl, R. (2004) On Anxiety. London: Routledge

Shirani, F. (2010) Researcher Change and Continuity in a Qualitative Longitudinal Study: The Impact of Personal Characteristics. In Shirani, F. and Weller, S. (eds) Conducting Qualitative Longitudinal Research: Fieldwork Experiences. Timescapes Working Paper Series No. 2

---

Squire, C. (2008) Approaches to Narrative Research. ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper. NCRM 009

Townsend, N. (2002) The Package Deal: Marriage, Work and Fatherhood in Men's Lives. Philadelphia: Temple University Press

Warren, C.A.B. (2002) Qualitative Interviewing. In Gubrium, J. and Holstein, J. (eds) Handbook of Interview Research. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage

Webb, R.E. and Daniluk, J.C. (1999) The End of the Line: Infertile Men's Experiences of Being Unable to Produce a Child. Men and Masculinities. 2(1) pp6-25

Zinn, J. O. (2004) 'Health, Risk and Uncertainty in the Life Course: A Typology of Biographical Certainty Constructions'. Social Theory and Health. 2(3) pp199-221