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“Oh yes, I remember it well!” Reflections on using the life-grid in qualitative interviews with couples

Abstract

The life-grid has previously been used as a tool for improving the reliability of retrospective data in epidemiology. Recent research has suggested that the life-grid may also prove a useful tool for qualitative sociological interviewing, by facilitating the asking of difficult questions and acting as an aide memoire. This paper describes a pilot study which examines the influences the life-grid has upon qualitative interviews with married couples. It finds that use of the life-grid limits interviewees' willingness to revisit topics, tends to create “event-centred”, non-reflexive, data and does not facilitate the asking of difficult questions. This paper does find that the life-grid acts to stimulate recall, but in a limited, factual fashion. It concludes that the life-grid is unlikely to prove an appropriate tool for qualitative researchers in its present form.

Keywords

Life-grid; retrospective data; qualitative interviewing; recall; couples; reflexivity

Theoretical introduction

The life-grid, an interview tool which structures the collection of life-event data into chronological categories, was initially developed to address issues of recall validity in retrospective medical research (for an example of a blank life-grid, please see appendix 1: Blank life-grid – at the end of the paper). However, recent research using the life-grid has suggested that it may provide further benefits to the qualitative interview process, such as an increase in interviewer-interviewee rapport. These benefits have not yet been thoroughly explored, nor has the life-grid's potential for negatively affecting qualitative interviews. This paper will briefly cover the development and uses of the life-grid, before detailing a pilot study which explicitly examines the three key ways in which using the life-grid influences the process of qualitative interviewing. These are: 1) does the life-grid increase the accuracy of data collected? 2) Does the life-grid improve the quality of the data collected, in terms of improving interviewees' reflexive insights? 3) Does the life-grid improve rapport between researcher and interviewee?

Development of the life-grid

Previous work utilising the life-grid has been primarily concerned with its potential to improve the accuracy of recalled data. Because of this, the literature discussed here is heavily slanted towards the first of the three issues mentioned above, namely does the life-grid increase the accuracy of data collected? Retrospective data is perceived to suffer from significant degrees of inaccuracy due to recall bias (Cherry and Rodgers, 1979) and recall error. Recall is seen as being particularly prone to bias when the period of recall is especially long, during which time interviewees can reassess their memories in light of their current life situation (Holland et al. 1999). The issues of recall accuracy, particularly relating to forgetting and telescoping errors (where and event is remembered as occurring more recently than it actually did), have been examined in some depth by cognitive psychologists. (See Sudman and Bradman, 1973 for a discussion of these effects.) This may provide relatively little problem for those sociologists for whom the focus may not be on what actually happened, but what participants believe happened and how they act as a consequence. However, in the field of sociology of epidemiology inaccuracy in recall may lead to erroneous conclusions where, for example, exposure to disease risk factors is being recalled. It is in fields such as this, where data regarding people's actual behaviour needs to be as accurate as possible, particularly where these data are treated as factual rather than attitudinal, that the life-grid was first used.

The first use of the life-grid in the UK appears to be in the Social Change and Economic Life Initiative in the late 1980's. The life-grid was used to provide a framework which could then be used to aid recall. The SCEL research team used geographical and family histories to assist in the recall of work histories for their respondents. Unfortunately the working paper which appears to discuss the use of the life-grid is no longer available and the published work on this aspect of the SCEL Initiative does not discuss the life-grid. However, some details on the use of the grid by the SCEL team can be found in Dex (1991).

Use of the life-grid was then developed and assessed for reliability by Blane (1996) and Berney and Blane (Berney and Blane, 1997) in health research. Blane's initial work developed the life-grid as a tool for collecting quantitative data from qualitative interview situations. Blane used the life-grid to collect data about interviewees' exposure to risk factors for chronic obstructive airway disease (COAD). After interviewees had completed the life-grid, the interviewer analysed the grid to produce the data required. The results of Blane's analysis suggested risk factors regarding the development of COAD similar to those in more conventional medical research (Higgins et al. 1982). Blane did not run a set of control interviews which did not use the life-grid, however. Instead, there was a tacit assumption that retrospective data collected without the use of the life-grid would be irredeemably compromised by error.

Interestingly, Blane also noted that the visual proximity of (apparently) unrelated events encouraged participants to recall further or link life events, although this was not considered to be a major finding. This suggests that the life-grid was acting as a tool to improve the quality and quantity of the data gathered, by encouraging interviewees to analyse their life stories reflexively. This is the first time we see the life-grid acting as more than a tool for the improvement of data accuracy.

In a similar study, Berney and Blane (1997) found that, with the life-grid technique, levels of recall accuracy on relatively simple data recalled from a

considerable time previously could be maintained at the levels typically found in studies of recall over much shorter time periods. Again though, there was no adequate control group present in this study. Despite Blane's (1996) and Berney and Blane's (*ibidem*) lack of control groups where non life-grid assisted interview data could be assessed for accuracy of recall, their assertion that the life-grid improved recall accuracy remains the main justification for use of the life-grid.

Parry, Thomson and Fowkes (1999) moved towards utilising the life-grid to recall and collect more qualitative data in their study of smoking behaviour. Parry and colleagues sought to link life events to smoking behaviour and felt that the life-grid would provide a useful tool with which to do so. The data they collected differs from Blane's (*ibidem*) and Berney and Blane's (1997) in that they are explicitly qualitative in nature. Furthermore, the life-grid is not seen as a tool for directly collecting the data, but rather a tool for facilitating the interview itself. Their use of the grid allowed both interviewer and interviewees to identify links between events during the interview and to discuss them explicitly, effectively acting as a tool to improve the quality of the data gathered. They do not, however, discuss the effect the life-grid may have had on interviewees' linking smoking behaviours to events which are not on the life-grid. It must be noted that the life-grid, while explicitly encouraging linking some events, will implicitly discourage linking other events. Given that life histories are constructed and edited based upon the situations in which they are told (Rosenthal, 1993), researchers using the life-grid must be aware of the possibilities which they are discouraging while encouraging others. This means that there must a possibility that while the life-grid appears to improve data quality, it may actually be degrading it, by restricting the extent to which interviewees feel able to discuss events not covered by the life-grid.

Additionally, Parry et al (1999) found that the use of the life-grid in the interview setting helped to establish a rapport. They noted that some interviewees were pleased that the interviewer knew some basic facts about them (e.g. date of birth). Furthermore, the act of completing the life-grid was seen by most interviewees as an entertaining challenge. Once the life-grid was completed, Parry et al report that there was a sense of joint endeavour between the interviewer and interviewee which helped establish a sense that the interview as a whole was a shared project. This sense of enjoyment at filling in the life-grid is also reported by the SCEL research team (see Dex, *ibidem*).

Unfortunately, the pilot study reported in this paper will not be able to directly address the issue of accuracy of recall, as external sources of comparison do not exist against which interviewees' life histories can be compared. However, Blane's (1996) and Parry et al's (1999) research suggests that the life-grid could be a useful tool for qualitative interviewing regardless of its effect on recall accuracy. The pilot study described here examined interviewees' uses of the life-grid and assessed the extent to which they use the life-grid as a cross-referencing tool, which, theoretically, should improve the accuracy of the data they recall (Loftus and Marburger, 1983). Furthermore, this pilot examines the other key affects which previous research has shown the life-grid to have upon the interview process, namely the extent to which it encouraged interviewees to produce and link data and the development of interview rapport.

In this paper I will discuss how the use of the life-grid during qualitative interviews affected the data gathered. Does the life-grid limit the data which interviewees produce, either by constraining the topics covered or the type of data generated (factual over attitudinal or reflexive data), thus degrading the quality of the

data gathered? Does the life-grid encourage a chronologically aware approach to the interview by participants, allowing for reflexive discussion surrounding changes over time and thus improving data quality? Does the life-grid facilitate returning to topics previously covered as it provides an aide-memoir to what has previously been discussed? Could the life-grid be used as a tool for indirectly approaching potentially difficult subjects (e.g. by phrasing questions to be about the life-grid, not about participants)? Does the life-grid improve the rapport developed in the interview situation? Lastly, are there any unexpected ways in which the life-grid affects the data or the interview process?

Methods

This paper discusses the results of a pilot study undertaken in preparation for a larger scale interview study on long term marriage in the UK. As well as addressing issues regarding the use of the life-grid, the pilot study also addressed issues of interviewing couples and substantive, topic based, issues for the main study (neither of which are reported here). The pilot consisted of in-depth qualitative interviews with three married couples. Each couple was interviewed both as a couple, as well as both partners being interviewed separately, making a total of nine interviews. During each of the nine interviews the life-grid was used to structure the interview and to assist in recall of retrospective data.

It should be noted that the author, who conducted this pilot, had had considerable interviewing experience from previous training and research projects (e.g. Bell, 2003) which allowed a reflexive comparison between qualitative interviews using the life-grid and those which do not.

Recruitment of participants

Participants were recruited outside a local supermarket which serves an area of similar approximate socio-economic composition to that of Scotland as a whole (SCROL, 2004). Couples were informed that, although the interviews would be about their relationship together, the main interest of the study was to pilot an interviewing method and that the analysis carried out would focus on the interview process rather than analysing their relationships. There were no obvious differences between the couples who did or did not agree to take part after being informed about the study, for instance those who agreed to take part represented a broad range of ages, as did those who refused to participate. Note, though, that the lack of difference between participating and non-participating couples is purely based on prima facie observations, as no factual details were gathered from non-participating couples. Those who agreed were then contacted a couple of days later and asked to confirm that they were still willing to participate in the study. None of the couples dropped out at this stage. Interviews were then arranged at the couples' homes at times convenient for them and were carried out after written, informed consent had been obtained.

It is worth noting that no couples with children present whilst shopping agreed to stop when first approached. Consequently, none of the couples recruited had dependent children younger than 14.

Sample characteristics

The three couples recruited had all been married for 25-30 years. Two of the couples had met when relatively young, at 15 and 16 for Mr and Mrs A and at 17 and 18 for Mr and Mrs C. Mr and Mrs B had met somewhat later, at 28 and 29 years old. The current ages of the participants range from 46-60 years old. For all but one of the participants their current marriage was their first marriage. Only Mr B had been married before.

All three of the couples had children living with them at the time of the study. For Mr and Mrs A and Mr and Mrs C these were dependent children from their marriage. For Mr and Mrs B, this was the daughter of the Mr B from his previous marriage and her daughter, their granddaughter, who had moved in temporarily. Mr and Mrs B had not had any children of their own during their marriage.

All of the participants were white Scottish, reflecting the overwhelmingly white population of the area involved (GRO-Scotland, 2004). The three couples recruited all lived within 10 minutes drive from the supermarket at which recruitment was conducted, although they all lived in different towns. Socio-economic class was not a criteria for recruitment, nor a major aspect of the study. The social group of the three couples recruited was assessed as middle class, although they represent the extremes of the income and status brackets that middle class covers. None of the three women involved in the study was in paid employment. Only Mrs B out of all of the participants had obtained a further educational qualification.

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Current age</i>	<i>Paid employment</i>	<i>Years married</i>	<i>Children</i>
Mr A	46	Self employed, advertising executive	25	2
Mrs A	46	None		
Mr B	60	Civil servant	30	0
Mrs B	59	None		
Mr C	52	Senior Management	25	2
Mrs C	50	None		

Table 1. Summary of key characteristics of participants

Interview method

Interviews were conducted by the author in the participants' homes. Mr and Mrs A and Mr and Mrs B were interviewed as couples first, and then each participant separately. Mr and Mrs C were interviewed separately first, and then as a couple after both separate interviews had been completed. This allows for comparison of effects of interview order on participants' responses to questions, as well as ensuring that differences between initial interviews and follow up interviews can be attributed to the difference in content, rather than the differences in interview situation.

The first round of interviews for each participant, whether being interviewed as a couple or singly, consisted of asking them to provide a history of their married life, focusing on events which the participants felt had been important to them. During each interview, the participants and the interviewer completed a life-grid, a tool

designed to improve the reliability of retrospective data and to facilitate discussion during interviews. The life-grid was filled in by the interviewer as the interviewees detailed their life stories. The life-grid was available throughout the interview for the interviewees to refer to in order to keep track of what they had already mentioned.

Interviewees were very much involved in reflecting upon the interview process. The first interviews concluded with a reflexive session, during which time the participants were encouraged to reflect upon the experience of the interview and how they had felt during it. The second interviews took a similar form, but with the first half focusing specifically on leisure pursuits and division of labour over time. Again, the interviewer completed a life-grid during this part of the interview. The interview again ended with a reflexive session, this time comparing the two interviews as well as examining how the second interview had gone.

All the interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the interviewer. Field notes were also taken during and after the interviews and these and the life-grids were referred to when sections of the tape recordings were unintelligible.

The life-grid

The life-grid was an A3 sheet of paper with a six column by fifty one row grid printed onto it. In the first round of interviews, the six columns were headed “Year”; “Age”; “Life Events”; a category for events such as moving house, new jobs and so forth; “Marriage and Family”, which covered events specifically related to either the couples' relationships with each other or their kin; “Holidays”; and “Relationship issues”, which was intended to provide space for highs and lows in the couples' relationships to be recorded. In the second round of interviews, “Holidays” and “Relationship Issues” were replaced by “Leisure pursuits” and “Division of Labour” respectively. Participants were introduced to the life-grid and informed about how it worked at the start of the interview. The life-grid was filled in by the interviewer, partly to ensure that completing the grid did not interrupt the flow of the interview and partly to ensure that the data gathered would be intelligible during later analysis. A blank life-grid is included in appendix 1: Blank life-grid – at the end of the paper.

Practicalities of working with life-grids

The practicalities of completing the life-grid with multiple participants in the same interview proved complex. Given that the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes and it was not possible to prepare a suitable set-up in advance, in two of the couple interviews either one or both of the participants could not see what was being written on the life grid. This clearly hindered the life-grid's intended function as an aide memoire for the participants when they could not refer to it easily throughout the interview. It would also have improved the sense of a shared task if the interviewees had been able to monitor what was being entered onto the life-grid. Additionally, when interviewees were not able to monitor what was being written on the life-grid they were unable to correct any mistakes which may have been entered at time. Moving to solve this would either have been socially unacceptable, as the interviewer had been clearly assigned a seat and moving to another one would have encroached on the participants' personal space, or would have been physically impossible, given the layout of the room. Although this was not ideal, it is debatable

how much the couples would have looked at or questioned what was being entered into the grid even if they had been able to see it. (See the results section on the influence of the life-grid on the interview for further discussion on this point.)

Completing the life-grid

Although participants were not given any specific instructions on how to complete the life-grid (i.e. they were not told to work chronologically, or to complete certain columns first before moving onto others), participants were however asked for a “history” of their relationship and this is bound to have influenced the way in which they talked during the interview. For example, participants tended to work largely chronologically, covering all of the columns in reference to a particular timeframe before progressing to the next timeframe, rather than mentioning key events (e.g. the birth of a child) in order of perceived importance to the task at hand, with no regard for chronological order. In the initial interviews, all interviewees were led by direct questioning from the time they met to the time at which they got married, with the data being entered into the life-grid as the interview progressed before they were asked to recount the history of their marriage and left to direct the interview themselves. During the first interviews, none of the participants completed the life-grid column by column, preferring instead the approach described above, which they felt was the most natural method of completion. This is in contrast to the work of Parry et al (1999), who found that column by column completion of the grid was the favoured approach. In the follow-up interviews, interviewees were not led into the interview, but were left to direct the pace and approach of the interview themselves from the beginning.

Method of Analysis

Once the interview data collected had been transcribed, a thematic content analysis was carried out. The data were initially subjected to an iterative within-case analysis to establish the themes and issues arising from individuals’ data. Specifically, the extent to which the content of the interview appeared to be influenced, either positively or negatively, by the life-grid was addressed as a key aim of the content analysis (Holsti, 1969). A cross-case analysis was then performed to establish if these themes were unique to the individuals concerned, or if they represented a trend across the entire sample (Huberman and Miles, 1994). A relatively limited discourse analysis was also performed on the data, primarily addressing the differences in interview talk between couple and individual interviews, which is not discussed in this article, although this analysis informed by some of the results regarding reflexive talk and emotional talk discussed below (Nunan, 1993). This analysis was done by hand, given that the amount of data did not warrant the use of a computer assisted analysis programme. The results that follow are based mainly upon this analysis of the transcripts and a reflexive assessment of the effects of the methods on the data which were generated. Where results or discussion are based on either field notes or on life-grid data this will be explicitly mentioned.

Results

Does the life-grid improve retrospective data accuracy?

The life-grid can be seen as encouraging certain strategies in the recollection of data by interviewees. For example, one event of unknown date may be recalled in relation to another event, whose date is already known. Providing the interviewee can recall the chronological relationship between these two events, they can calculate the missing date with reference to the known date. These strategies have been seen as improving the accuracy of recalled data, particularly with reference to the time at which events happened (e.g. Blane, 1996). During the pilot interviews discussed here, interviewees used other events, either public events such as wars or private events such as the birth of a child, as reference points to which other, less clearly recalled events could be linked. This is a standard technique for recalling information about past events and the life-grid is not vital, but it does provide a formalisation of the process and encourage interviewees to recall in this way. As the life-grid lays these events out, then the interviewee can link other events to them explicitly, and with the help of a numbered grid. Thus the data should be more reliable in terms of chronology. Examples of both recall in relation to a public event and recall in relation to a private event were found in the study. Of course, this method of dating requires that the date being worked from is correctly remembered to improve recall accuracy. For instance, it appeared that Mrs C incorrectly remembered her date of birth, and thus gave an incorrect date when she first met her husband, although the life grid allowed for some degree of internal checking which caught this error.

As Mr and Mrs C were interviewed separately first, they each completed a individual life-grid detailing the main events in their relationship. Some of the events recorded were mentioned in each life-grid, but as occurring at different times. When attempting to compile a composite life-grid for Mr and Mrs C it was noticed that only 6 out of 11 events that were on both grids were noted as happening on the same date. This calls into question the hoped for improvements in data accuracy, although some degree of error is to be expected in recollection of exact dates. Some degree of blame for the varying dates on the life grids must attach to the interviewer. At several points events were noted down in a best guess position, so as not to interrupt the flow of the narrative in order to get exact dates. Providing the events were in an obvious time order, it was felt that the increased reliability (or perhaps verifiability) of exact dates would not outweigh the disruption to the flow of the interview. Additionally, given the highly qualitative nature of the main project, it was not felt that an extremely high degree of data accuracy was necessary.

While some degree of error in the reporting of dates may not prove significant, a more important disagreement was found to have occurred between Mr and Mrs C's single interview life-grids. The dates, and more importantly the sequence, of two significant events in their marriage were different in each interview. Mr C dated his nervous breakdown with a specific year, 1990, and dated a disastrous trip to London as being on his 40th birthday, two years later. Mrs C dated the London trip as being on her 40th birthday, but placed Mr C's breakdown after the trip, although not with explicit dates, but by referring to events caused by the trip to London as leading up (in part) to the breakdown. This is clearly quite a major disagreement in versions of events. As well as being a factual disagreement, the different sequencing lead to significantly different interpretations of the reasons of their holiday to London being so unenjoyable, with Mrs C seeing the trip as being one of several symptoms leading up to her husband's breakdown. In this part of the interview, the life-grid does not appear to have either improved the reliability of the data given the disagreement, nor

did the life-grid highlight the error until after the interview had finished, unlike the example mentioned in the paragraph above.

Life-grid influences on the interview data

There were several ways in which the use of the life-grid could affect the interview data gathered which fall outside the realm of data accuracy. Firstly the pilot study found that the life-grid appeared to influence interviewees' narrative in relation to changes over time.

During their first interviews, all of the interviewees approached their narratives from a chronologically driven perspective. Interviewees tended to discuss events in the order in which they occurred, rather than in the order of their importance. Although they approached events chronologically, it was still clear which events interviewees saw as being the most important to them. The life-grid did not inhibit their ability to express the differing importance of events. When discussing their life histories, interviewees inherently addressed the concept of time and change over time without being prompted to do so by the interviewer. This allows for a richer data set to be gathered, as interviewees talk reflexively about the changes in their lives. Interestingly, however, in the follow up interviews, only Mr and Mrs C, who were interviewed as a couple, continued to discuss issues in relation to change over time. All of the other interviewees required much more prompting to discuss changes over time.

Although it is by no means conclusive, there is some evidence to suggest that the use of the life-grid, not the difference in interview dynamics between single and couple interviews nor the difference in topics discussed, leads to these different approaches to time in the initial and follow up interviews. If the tendency to address the affects of time were related purely to being interviewed as a couple, then it would be expected that Mr and Mrs C's initial interviews would not address changes over time, but this is not the case. If the topics under discussion were the cause of the differences between interviews, we would expect Mr and Mrs C to follow the same pattern as the other interviewees, but this is not the case. The use of the life-grid in Mr and Mrs C's follow up interview did, however, differ from its use in the other follow up interviews. As has been mentioned above, a composite life-grid was created from Mr and Mrs C's single interview life-grids, but this composite life-grid required some additional input and checking to complete it. In this fashion, Mr and Mrs C were actively re-introduced to and involved with the life-grid. In the other follow up interviews, where the life-grid was simply a copy of the one completed in the previous couple interviews, interviewees were simply asked to read over the life-grid and suggest any corrections or additions. This difference may have meant that Mr and Mrs C were given more of a warm up to thinking chronologically than the other interviewees.

It must also be noted that other possible explanations exist for this difference between Mr and Mrs C and the other two couples. It could be that there is an interaction between the single/couple interview dynamic and the topics discussed, it could be that Mr and Mrs C are more predisposed to thinking chronologically than the other interviewees, or it could be related to differing desires to re-engage with the interview process, as Mr and Mrs C had the longest break between initial and follow up interviews out of all the interviewees.

Secondly, it was found that the life-grid did not facilitate difficult subjects to be raised safely in the interview situation. Interviews about marriage and personal relationships obviously have the potential to broach subjects which are emotionally

difficult for interviewees to discuss and potentially difficult for the interviewer raise. The presence of the life-grid in the interview had the potential to act as a device to allow difficult issues to be raised indirectly by the interviewer. For example, a section of Mr and Mrs A's life-grid was highlighted by the interviewer where a large number of entries clustered around one time period.

Int: ...Just to cover a few periods you were mentioning, perhaps to recap over some of the things. You were saying when you erm, when you started your very first business, back in 85, erm, 85/86 sort of time, and in 87 started your family, err, you were saying you were obviously very busy and you were obviously had a new baby to contend with, how did that affect your relationship?

Note that in the example above, the question “how did that affect your relationship?” has to be explicitly articulated rendering the question more direct than indirect. It had been hoped that the life-grid could act as a point of discussion which would be at one remove from interviewees' lives, however it did not prove possible to address questions in such a fashion.

Similarly, the rather prescriptive, event driven, nature of the life-grid, which is discussed further below, meant that it was very difficult to phrase questions so that they unpacked interviewees' opinions on events in their lives rather than simply prompting a recap of the events at that time. In the example below, Mr and Mrs B were asked to elaborate on a difficult period in their relationship, but as the question is phrased to be primarily concerned with the timing of this, the response is based on factual events, rather than emotional experiences. A more direct question had to be asked to prompt a more emotionally based response. This was typical of the difficulties in phrasing questions indirectly with the assistance of the life-grid.

Int: So was that, the sort of difficult time period been from about 82ish, when you moved to [town2] initially through to about, erm, say 10, 12 years ago, about 95 kind of time, or was there a particularly, particularly bad patch in that?

Thirdly, and in a similar vein, it was hoped that the life-grid would enable the interviewees to return to certain topics that had been previously mentioned with relative ease, as the life-grid would act as an aide-memoir to the events which they had been discussing by contextualising them in relation to other events they had previously mentioned. However, when interviewees were asked about topics they had previously raised, there seemed to be a general reluctance to elaborate significantly on them. Instead, interviewees would tend to discuss other events, which might be somewhat related to the event or time on which they were initially probed. Interviewees seemed to feel a requirement to discuss new events which had not already been entered into the life-grid. This obviously made returning to previously mentioned topics problematic. For example, when Mr and Mrs A were asked to further discuss how a prolonged stay in hospital for Mrs A had affected their relationship they instead discussed similar events (hospital stays) which had not been mentioned before in preference to returning to a topic already discussed. To this end, the life-grid appears to have increased the quantity of data gathered, by reducing the extent of forgetting of past events, but has not necessarily improved the quality of the data gathered.

Furthermore, the sense of having to complete the life-grid during the interview influenced the interview dynamic from the interviewer's perspective. There was a

reluctance to interrupt narratives when they were making good progress through the history of the interviewees' relationships in order to focus on specific events, occurrences or feelings. This meant that not only did the life-grid make returning to topics difficult, thus making it more important to probe at the time, but it also decreased the likelihood of timely probes from the interviewer.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly for the implications for use of the life-grid in qualitative interviewing, the use of the life-grid seemed to encourage a particularly event driven narrative approach from interviewees. This approach had several consequences for the data which were produced by the interviews. For instance the data were "event centred". Thus data which did not fit into the life-grid, but were generated by interviewees talking around events seemed only to come up if there was an event into which the data could be linked. As much of day to day life is comparatively uneventful, this "event centred" nature of the narrative did not lend itself to the unpacking of day to day life. Interviewees did discuss their day to day lives but only when they coincided with an event in their relationship. Thus, significant amounts of data were generated in relation to change in day to day routine at the birth of children, an event which clearly influenced both partners and their relationship. In contrast there were comparatively few data generated about the changes in day to day life when children went to school for the first time, an event which, in this sample, is likely to have had a much more significant effect on the women involved, but less of an impact on the men. The life-grid appeared to discourage interviewees from discussing day to day events when they could not be linked to more unique or significant events in the relationship. This also meant that gradual changes in routine were not discussed in any of the interviews.

Furthermore, the "event centred" nature of the narratives led to a particular focus on the factual side of interviewees' relationships. For example, when Mr and Mrs A were discussing the hospital stay mentioned above, they discussed it in relation to the practicalities of child-care and disruption to routine, rather than in emotional terms. This was surprising, considering the period of hospitalisation included a dangerous operation. It should not be inferred from this that all of the interview talk was non-reflexive. However, when interviewees were completing the life-grid, their narratives tended to focus more on the factual aspects of their relationships than on the emotional aspects.

This factual, event centred narrative must be seen in part as being influenced as much by the application of the life-grid by the author, as by the use of the life-grid itself. Out of a desire to ensure the data gathered would be legible to the author, the life-grid was filled in by the researcher, not by the interviewees. Although the researcher was careful to only enter events highlighted by the participants as important, this may well have sent out signals that this (the life-grid and its completion) was what the researcher was interested in. However, even if interviewees had filled in the life-grid themselves, it is likely that a pre-printed sheet provided by the researcher would have had a similar constraining effect.

The non-reflexive narrative the life-grid seemed to encourage may also be linked to the life-grid's design as being concerned with specific events. Doucet (1996) discusses the use of a "Household Portrait", where couples are asked to assign various household tasks to one of five categories. Doucet finds that this task encourages couples to reflect upon these tasks and to produce richer data. The difference may be due to the household portrait dealing with generalities, but the life-grid dealing with specifics. The general nature of the household portrait may be vital in ensuring that couples do not become focused on factual events.

While the interviewees may have been led by the life-grid to providing a very event centred narrative, when they reflected upon the interview, interviewees did not feel that they had been tailoring their life stories to suit the grid. They particularly emphasised that they did not worry about the column headings of the life-grids. Interviewees' assertions that they were not simply responding to the column headings is given further support by the completed life-grids, in particular the "holidays". While all interviewees had some holidays which they felt were of particular importance or memorability, none of them felt obliged to provide a complete list of all of the holidays they had been on. Interviewees also said that the column headings were sufficiently general that they did not feel constrained by the headings.

Unexpectedly, the life-grid seems to take on a degree of inviolability once it has been completed. When the second, individual, interviews were conducted with Mr and Mrs A and B, copies of the life-grids which had been completed during the couple interviews were brought back and each interviewee was asked to read over the life-grid and asked if they had any additions or corrections they would like to see. Given that some of the events had been entered at best guess dates by the interviewer and given the degree of disagreement between Mr and Mrs C's life-grid described above, it is likely that some of the information included on the life-grids must have not agreed with the interviewees' recollections. Despite this, only one interviewee, Mr A, raised any issues with the life-grid as it was presented to him. When the composite life-grid was being prepared for Mr and Mrs C's couple interview, two events which both had mentioned were intentionally left off the composite life-grid by the researcher and were not mentioned by the interviewer. When asked if there were any corrections or additions they would like to make to the life-grid, Mr and Mrs C only mentioned one of the two events. It is possible that the life-grid becomes an authorised version of the relationship, and to add to it or correct it is to contradict your partner. Alternatively, the interviewees may not wish to contradict the "expert" interviewer, as the original life-grids were completed by the interviewer for reasons of expediency detailed above in the methods section. Furthermore, it is possible that the interviewees simply did not concentrate on reading the life-grids, or on thinking of things which could be added. Lastly, the data included on the life-grids may have been an adequate representation of the events which interviewees perceived to be important in their lives.

Interviewees' responses to the life-grid and the interview process

The above findings have focused on the effects the life-grid has had upon the interview data, based largely upon the data themselves. However, the life-grid also had an effect in the ways in which interviewees reacted to it. These responses can be broken down into three categories: alarm at first being introduced to the life-grid; satisfaction at completion of the life-grid; and pleasant surprise at the structure of the interview process as a whole.

Alarm surrounding the introduction of the life-grid was understandably centred on the intimidating appearance of the life-grid. At the time of producing the life-grid, a lack of data regarding the couples meant that the life-grid was printed on A3 paper, even though for two of the three couples the life-grid could have fitted onto an A4 sheet. Furthermore, the design of the life-grid makes a blank copy look particularly busy, with many lines, columns and boxes. Although Mr A was the only one to raise the issue of the appearance of the life-grid, from their reactions when first introduced to it, the other interviewees also found it slightly intimidating. It was possible, however, to mitigate this alarm by introducing some degree of shared humour

between interviewer and interviewee regarding the life-grid. Although most qualitative interviews will have some point in the beginning at which the interviewee is nervous or intimidated (often when a tape recorder is produced), it was noticeable that the life-grid increased the level of disquiet, especially as its introduction came after the interviewees had initially been settled in to the interview. To this end, the life-grid did not produce an immediate improvement in rapport, unlike that experienced by Parry et al (1999).

Once the life-grid was completed several interviewees expressed satisfaction at having produced a tangible history of their relationship. Although standard qualitative interviewing tends to produce pleasure for interviewees from telling their stories, use of the life-grid produces a very obvious result and one which led to other memories surfacing. Even though these additional memories may not have been useful to the interviewer in this present study, as they were often very factual in nature, interviewees were very aware of the life-grid prompting these memories, and this seemed to give them a sense of pleasure and usefulness from the life-grid.

Lastly, interviewees expressed pleasant surprise at the open ended nature of the interview process as a whole. Both Mr and Mrs B and Mr and Mrs C mentioned that they had been expecting a more questionnaire style approach, with strict questions and strict possible answers and both couples were pleased to have had their expectations confounded. Clearly the life-grid did not seem constraining to them by the end of the interview.

Interviewer's responses to the life-grid and the interview process

From the perspective of the qualitative interviewer, the life-grid complicates the task of interviewing to some extent. From a practical perspective, the space required to complete the life-grid is slightly larger than a lap can comfortably accommodate. When interviewing in participants' homes, this can mean either struggling for space throughout the interview if the seat which you have been assigned is not near a table, or asking to move, which at times would not be appropriate. Furthermore, as discussed in the methods section above, it was not always possible for interviewees to be able to see what was written on the life-grid, which would have been desirable if only to allow them to object to or correct data as it was entered and to make the life-grid feel more like a collaborative effort.

In its original usage the life-grid was designed to assess factual data in terms of years of behaviour or exposure to risk factors and, as such, the emphasis was clearly upon obtaining detailed, accurate, factual data with regard to dates. In its current usage, as a tool for primarily facilitating the qualitative interview process, the importance of specific dates has decreased. However, the life-grid is a very regimented tool which requires events to be entered under certain years. As a qualitative sociological interviewer, when faced with data which are not clearly dated by the interviewee, the interviewer can either insert the event at the point at which they think it has occurred, (previously referred to in this paper as "best guess"), or they can interrupt the flow of the interview. Too many best guesses risks possibly contaminating the data in terms of sequence of events. Too many interruptions for specific dates risks damaging the narrative, both in terms of flow, but also in terms of focusing the interviewee too heavily towards factual data at the expense of reflexive data.

Finally, completion of the life-grid requires a significant amount of cognitive effort which would otherwise have been available for use in monitoring and responding to interviewees' life stories. Completing the life-grid is similar to having to

maintain two different but similar sets of field notes. That said, the life-grid does provide useful data which may not have been included in field notes. At several points during the transcription process for this study, life-grids were able to shed light upon unintelligible portions of tape which field notes had not. Furthermore, the life-grid does make it undeniably easier to assess the sequence of events described by interviewees compared to assessing the sequence of events directly from either tapes or transcriptions of the interviews.

Conclusion

Although there is not an external data source to which participants' narratives may be compared, the evidence from this study does not seem to support the assertion by Blane (1996) and Berney and Blaine (1997) that the life-grid improves the accuracy of recalled data. Some degree of disagreement over exact years is to be expected and often it may not be an important concern to qualitative researchers. A more significant error is that of the different sequencing of two key events by Mr and Mrs C. These events can be seen to have a causal link and yet one of the two participants has recalled them in the incorrect order despite the assistance of the life-grid. However, as Coleman (Coleman, 1991) asks, does it matter if the facts of a life story are inaccurate if the message and content remain accurate? Although this lack of accuracy may not be important to many qualitative researchers, it does raise questions as to the use of the life-grid to improve recall accuracy in those fields where accurate, factual data are required..

There is evidence to suggest in this study that interviewees did tell their stories in a more chronological fashion than if they had not been completing the life-grid. It could be argued that this stops interviewees from telling their stories as they would do so naturally, but providing that the content of the narratives is not altered, merely the order of their telling, then this does not appear significant to the author. All qualitative interviews are structured to some extent by the interviewer and by social conventions, otherwise the data would be impossible to interpret.

The life-grid also appears at times to encourage interviewees to address the issue of change over time explicitly in their narratives. However, this seems to require active participation with the life-grid at an early stage in the interview, before the substantive questions begin. Simply having a life-grid present, and asking interviewees to recount a history does not produce narratives which take into account change over time, even when they have taken part in a life-grid interview within the last week.

Completing the life-grid task does produce a sense of gratification and rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee, as Parry et al (1999) found. However, due to the limited data known about the participants in this study, there was no opportunity to take advantage of the early improvements in rapport which Parry et al (ibidem) were able to establish by utilising the life-grid as a reference guide to certain biographical facts about the interviewee. This meant that the rapport which the completion of the life-grid produced was only really felt towards the end of the interview, when a rapport would be expected to have developed between interviewer and interviewee in a standard qualitative interview in any case. Furthermore, the initial appearance and imposing nature of the life-grid may hinder the development of rapport at the start of the interview when it is most needed.

More worryingly, given the emotional focus of much qualitative interviewing, use of the life-grid in its current form seems to encourage a non-reflexive, event centred narrative. Not only are day to day aspects of life often skipped over by interviewees,

but they do not tend to focus on the emotional aspects to their experiences, instead tending to try and complete the apparent task of having to produce events to fit in the life-grid. This clearly suggests that such an event focused tool as the life-grid may be inappropriate for a topic which requires a significant degree of reflexivity from participants.

Additionally, the life-grid does not facilitate other aspects of the interviewing process. The event centred nature of the life-grid makes it unsuitable for the indirect phrasing of potentially difficult questions. Interviewees were also unwilling to return to events which they had already discussed, preferring instead to discuss previously unmentioned events and thus continue with the task of completing the life-grid. This, coupled with the life-grid's tendency to inhibit interviewer probes, meant that follow up questions were significantly harder to ask and have answered than in standard qualitative interviews.

It should be noted, though, that the negative effects discussed may be significantly related to the situation in which the life-grid was being used (i.e. with relatively confident, adult couples in their own homes, discussing, for the most part, relatively unthreatening topics). Other recent research utilising the life-grid in interviews with young people discussing parental substance use found opposite results from those documented above, suggesting that the interview situation will have significant impacts upon the life-grid's efficacy as a qualitative interviewing tool (Wilson et al, forthcoming).

Overall, the debilitating aspects of the life-grid appear to outweigh the enabling ones in relation to qualitative interviews on attitudinal or emotional topics in this study. Parry et al's (ibidem) data, while more qualitative than previous life-grid researchers, still focuses on relatively factual data, and for this the life-grid may still prove a suitable tool, although only if the researchers involved find it aids them in the collection of data, as its use cannot be justified purely on data reliability. However, there are some positive aspects to the life-grid, not least of which its encouragement to interviewees to address the issue of change over time. As the life-grid as it currently stands though, it is too imposing and too date and event centred and these aspects affect the interview process significantly. Perhaps a less formal version of the life-grid which is less clearly event driven and less date focused, a simple time-line perhaps, may provide some of the benefits while mitigating some of the more detrimental aspects of the life-grid.

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