

Qualitative Ethnographic Research and Biosocial Science.

Thinking through 'mixed methods' and the
lifecourse

Sahra Gibbon
Anthropology Department, UCL
s.gibbon@ucl.ac.uk



Themes covered

- ▶ Differences Epidemiology and Anthropology
- ▶ Differences and Convergence as Opportunities
- ▶ Mixed Methods Research : Interdisciplinarity
- ▶ Understanding the 'life-course': scope for mixed methods

Two case studies

- ▶ Life history narratives from quantitative data
- ▶ Qualitative Longitudinal Research



Epidemiology and Anthropology: a 'fraught' relationship?

- ▶ **Epidemiology** – focus on statistical power, universal categories, generalisability ('size matters')
- ▶ **Anthropology** - focus on the particular, acknowledgement of heterogeneity ('small is beautiful')
- ▶ **Differences**
 - Scale
 - Epistemologies: 'what counts as knowledge' (evidence)
 - Research questions: how versus what, when or where?



'Cultural Factorization' in epidemiology (DiGiacomo 2008)

- ▶ Possible to isolate cultural concepts from one context without changing meaning in another
- ▶ Possible to reify culture as values/ attitudes that become attached to particular group
- ▶ Culture understood as either a protective or risk factor
- ▶ Only 'others' have culture
- ▶ Attitudes and values attributable to particular ethnic group become 'unreasonable' or evidence of misinformation



Methodology as culture

'Methodology is merely a human designed tool to interpret reality'
(Behague, Concalves, Victoria 2008)



Convergences as opportunities?

- ▶ Conceptual and Analytical similarities = both interested in explanation
- ▶ Develop dialogue as 'iterative process' – challenge each others assumptions and limitations
- ▶ What an anthropology informed by epidemiology might look like?
- ▶ What global health (more) informed by anthropology might be? (Pigg 2013, see also Yates-Doerr 2020)

(see Inhorn 2011, Behague, Goncalves and Vitoria 2009)



Multidisciplinary → Interdisciplinary

‘Truly **multidisciplinary** research needs to **incorporate** the conceptual frameworks and knowledge bases of participating disciplines’

(Lambert and McKeivitt 2002)

‘theoretical **interdisciplinarity** was more likely to unfold if we actively **challenged** each discipline’s epistemological assumptions and limitations’

(Behague, Concalves, Victoria 2008)



'Bioethnography': (Roberts 2018)



Mexican Exposures



A Bioethnographic Approach to Health and Inequality

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Tomatillos and peppers on the stove in Mexico City

Mexican Exposures (MEXPOS) is a collaborative project that brings together medical anthropologists and environmental health scientists to create a *bioethnographic* research platform. This platform combines data gathered through both ethnographic and bioscience methods to arrive at a better understanding of the larger histories, life circumstances, and environments that shape health, disease, and inequality. Our bioethnographic platform joins two different methodological bundles—ethnographic observation and biochemical sampling—in a synthetic, symmetrical analysis that understands environment-body interactions as always relational, contingent, and constructed phenomena (see [recent publications](#)). The current iteration of our bioethnographic platform includes 1) ongoing collaboration between anthropologists and researchers from the longitudinal environmental health project [ELEMENT](#) (Early Life Exposures in Mexico to ENvironmental Toxicants), where we combine previously gathered ethnographic and environmental health data, and now 2) an



<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mexican-exposures/>



What is mixed methods research?

'Mixed methods research combines elements from both qualitative and quantitative paradigms to produce converging findings in the context of complex research questions'

(Lingard, Albert, Levinson 2008)



Why mixed methods?

- ▶ To explore health behaviours as dynamic social phenomena
- ▶ To explore complexity in health outcomes – biological, environmental and social factors
- ▶ To triangulate and validate results
- ▶ To produce results which can inform health policy and practice



Interdisciplinarity

Anthropology → epidemiology

- ▶ Informing the research question(s)
- ▶ Questionnaire design
- ▶ Informing analysis
- ▶ Exploring associations

Epidemiology → anthropology

- ▶ Informing the sampling frame
- ▶ Informing the research questions
- ▶ Informing the research design
- ▶ Testing generalisability of results



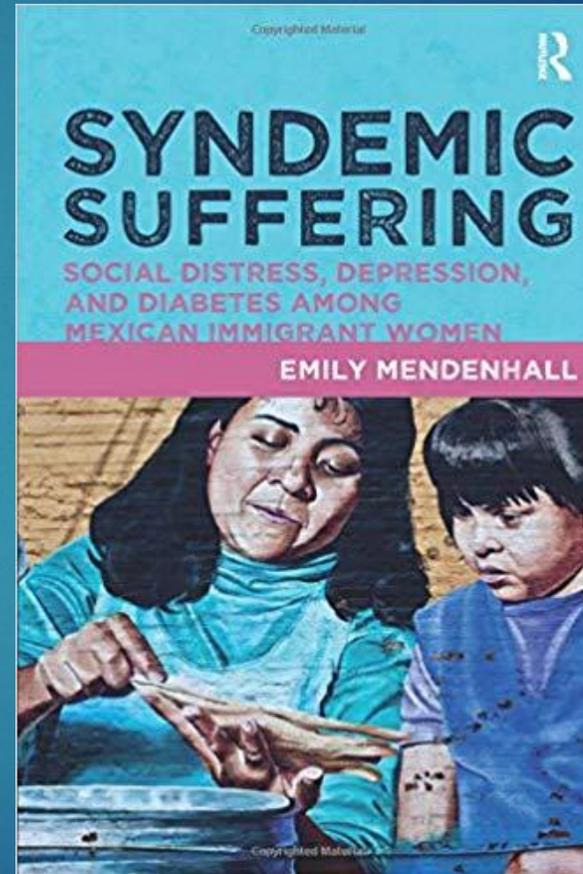
How to do Mixed Methods?

- ▶ 'chicken or egg' : which first qualitative and quantitative
- ▶ (emic/etic meanings):e.g. ageing
- ▶ What is lost and gained?
- ▶ Experiences of Mixed Methods Research: please look at suggested readings in Somatosphere on 'bioculturalism'
- ▶ E.g Dressler blood pressure and Kin relations in African American community



Emily Mendenhall (2008) *Syndemic Suffering. Social Distress, Depression and Diabetes Among Mexican Immigrant Women*. London Routledge

'matching biomarkers with critical assessment of health inequalities only strengthens arguments and anthropologists abilities to make their work relevant outside of anthropology, weaving robust theoretical arguments with the biological or psychological data which maybe communicated as biomedical' evidence.
(Bioculturalism, in Somatosphere 2015)

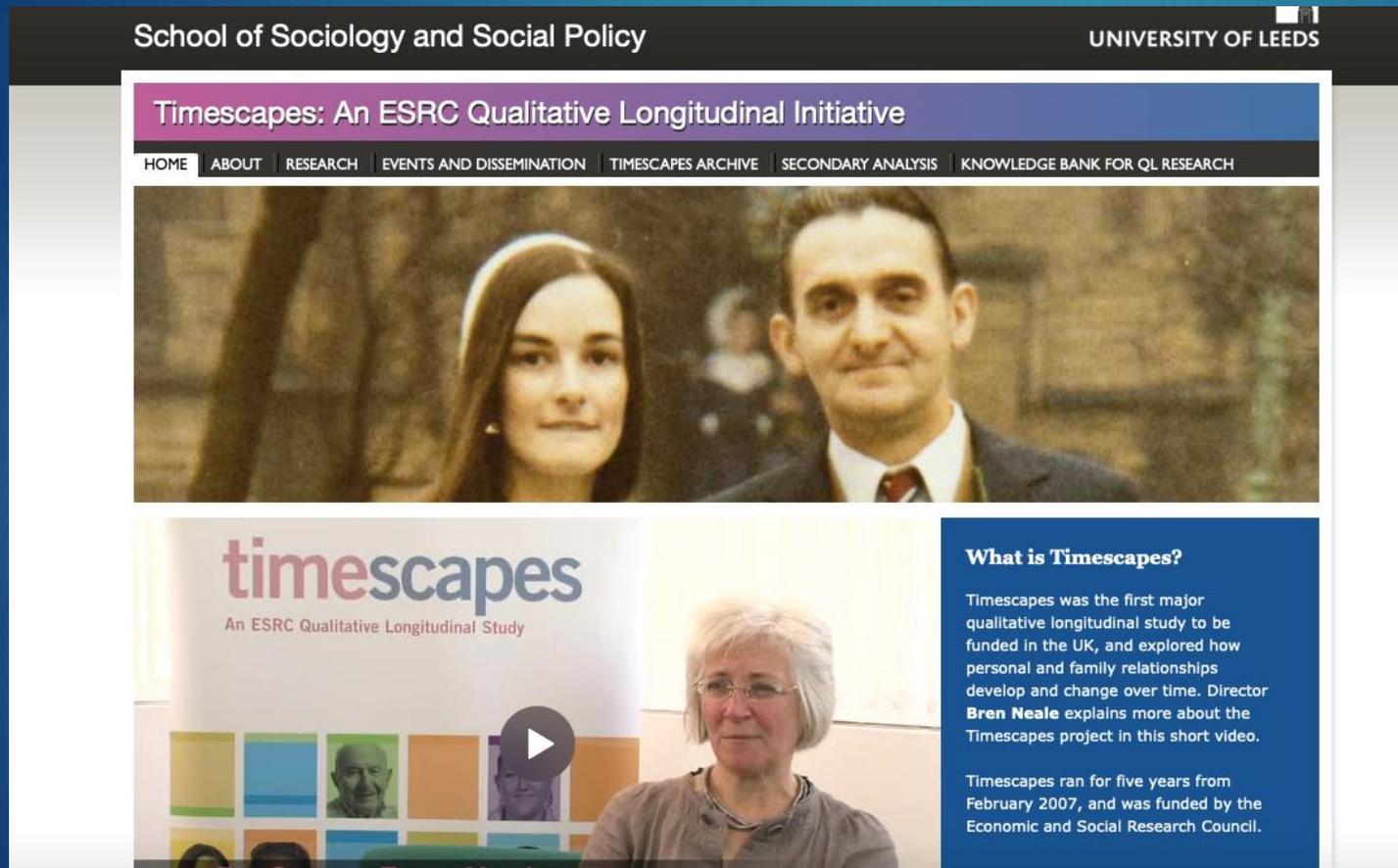


Lifecourse Approaches: opportunities for mixed methods

- ▶ Life course and Longitudinal Studies
 - ▶ Prospective studies (sometimes combined with retrospective gathering of past data)
 - ▶ The 'lifecourse' as organizing framework
 - ▶ To follow individuals, households, collectives in real time
 - ▶ To engage with temporal dimensions of experience (change and continuity)
- ▶ Case studies:
 - ▶ Life course narratives from quantitative longitudinal data (Sharland et al 2017)
 - ▶ Qualitative Longitudinal Research (Neale 2019)



'Qualitative Life course research' (Neale 2019)



The screenshot shows the homepage of the Timescapes website. At the top, it identifies the 'School of Sociology and Social Policy' and the 'UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS'. The main heading is 'Timescapes: An ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Initiative'. Below this is a navigation menu with links for 'HOME', 'ABOUT', 'RESEARCH', 'EVENTS AND DISSEMINATION', 'TIMESCAPES ARCHIVE', 'SECONDARY ANALYSIS', and 'KNOWLEDGE BANK FOR QL RESEARCH'. The central image features a man and a woman. Below the image is a video player with the 'timescapes' logo and the text 'An ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Study'. To the right of the video player is a blue box titled 'What is Timescapes?' containing text about the study's funding and duration.

School of Sociology and Social Policy UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Timescapes: An ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Initiative

HOME ABOUT RESEARCH EVENTS AND DISSEMINATION TIMESCAPES ARCHIVE SECONDARY ANALYSIS KNOWLEDGE BANK FOR QL RESEARCH

timescapes
An ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Study

What is Timescapes?

Timescapes was the first major qualitative longitudinal study to be funded in the UK, and explored how personal and family relationships develop and change over time. Director **Bren Neale** explains more about the Timescapes project in this short video.

Timescapes ran for five years from February 2007, and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

<http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/index.html>

Three 'film genres':

- ▶ Epic Movie
- ▶ Intimate Movie
- ▶ Intimate Epic Movie?





▶ **'EPIC MOVIE' : Quantitative Longitudinal Survey**

- ▶ Gold standard of life course approach
- ▶ Method regular questionnaires (every 1-5 years)
- ▶ Large scale patterns of change from large data sets
- ▶ What changes, for whom, direction and extent of change (e.g. observing social effects of poverty, migration, ill health)
- ▶ Panoramic 'bird eye view' : big 'thin' data?
- ▶ What is left out?





▶ **'INTIMATE MOVIE': Qualitative Longitudinal Research**

- ▶ Long history in social science – change and continuity in way lives unfold
- ▶ Small scale in-depth studies of individuals/communities tracked over time
- ▶ Focus not on events but **agency of individuals** in producing narrative coherence in lives
- ▶ Show how and why social world unfolds/changes in different ways and how experienced/managed: more explanatory power than quantitative longitudinal study?
- ▶ Elliott (2005) accessing the 'reflexive individual'



- ▶ **'INTIMATE EPIC MOVIE'** : a way of bridging the gap in life course studies?
 - ▶ Qualitative research nested within quantitative surveys
 - ▶ Scaling up of qualitative research combine breadth with depth
 - ▶ Revisiting existing data sets both qualitative and quantitative
 - ▶ Qualitative panel research as 'intimate epics': grounded big rich data but retain depth/explanatory power
 - ▶ Longitudinal biography E.g. Timescapes Study (<http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk>) and [oldest generation project](#) (see Bornat and Bytheway 2008, 2010)



Assembling life history narratives from quantitative longitudinal panel data (Sharland et al 2017)

- ▶ Life history narratives of families using social work from British Household Panel survey
- ▶ To understand 'counter-intuitive result' of multivariate analysis that families using social work have worse outcomes than others
- ▶ Constructing 'narrative biographies' (Singer et al 1998) for two families
 - ▶ 300 + variables across all waves
 - ▶ Self report to standardized questionnaires



Questions for Q and A

- ▶ What does using LHN reveal about the complexity, diversity and non-linear pathways between families, needs, support and outcomes?
- ▶ What do the authors mean by 'diversities of resilience'? How is this revealed in LHN approaches?
- ▶ Do you agree that LHN helps explain the finding from quantitative studies that parents using social work and their children do worse over time?
- ▶ What other kind of 'mixed methods' studies might be necessary to further explore this finding?

