

## Poverty and the Life-Cycle in Twentieth Century Ireland: A Childhood Centred Analysis

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## Introduction

- Context
  - Increased interest in understanding dynamic relationship between poverty and life-cycle (NESC Report (2005) on 'Developmental Welfare State')
  - Quantitative longitudinal evidence on:
    - Intergenerational transmission of poverty across the life-cycle (Nolan et al. 2006)
    - Dynamics of poverty and the life-cycle (Whelan and Maître 2008)
- Objective of this study
  - Add to the evidence base through adoption of a **qualitative longitudinal** approach

## Topics

- Summary of evidence on life-cycle and social change in 20<sup>th</sup> century
- Introduction to the 'Life Histories and Social Change Project' at NUIM and methodological strategy
- Thematic analysis of accounts of education and 'starting out' in three cohorts
- Composite life stories and key turning points
- Conclusions

## The Life-Cycle and Social Change in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

- Institutionalization and standardization
- From standardization to de-standardization?
- Prolongation of early adulthood and 'unbundling' of early adult life transitions
  - Different pattern and timing of changes in Ireland
- Poverty and the life-cycle – new risks?
  - Enhanced risks of poverty at specific life-cycle stages
  - Continuing importance of 'old risks' at all stages
  - Transition to early adulthood as key 'turning point'
  - Education as key 'mediating' variable in inter-generational transmission of poverty
  - But – diminishing returns to education in 20<sup>th</sup> century (Breen and Whelan 1993)

## The 'Life Histories and Social Change Project' at NUIM

- Guided life story interviews with 113 respondents who had participated in the 'Living in Ireland Study' – 1994-2001
  - Three birth cohorts (Before 1935; 1945-1954; 1965-1974)
  - Also life history calendars and social network schedules
  - Thanks to ESRI Survey Unit for assistance
- Co-Principal Investigators – Sean O Riain and Jane Gray
- Funded by Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences

## Methodological Strategy

- What can qualitative longitudinal research offer?
- Thematic analysis of life stories
  - Respondents who reported (in LII) that their households had 'difficulty making ends meet' in childhood (47 cases)
  - Focus on education and 'starting out'
- 'Composite narratives' for each cohort
  - Sub-sample of individuals who experienced income poverty in 1990s
  - Nine cases – three in each cohort

## Growing up in the 1930s and 1940s - Context

- Period dominated by 'rural fundamentalism' in state economic policy (Commins 1986)
- Social policy paradigm of 'patriarchal familism' (Fahey 1998), but
  - Compulsory school attendance (since 1926)
  - Expansion of social welfare programmes (including children's allowance (1944))
- Social structure
  - High proportion labour force employed in agriculture
  - Distinctive demographic regime
- Education policy centred on nationalist project
  - More than 60% 14-16 year olds not in education

## Growing up in the 1930s and 1940s - Themes

- Physical hardship
  - Work on farm before and after school
  - Physical punishment
  - Difficulty getting to school
- Regret at not being able to continue in education
- Kin obligations and class differences starting out
- INT: And when you were going to school what did you hope you were going to get out of life? When you grew up then?
- RESP: [Incredulous laughter]. You didn't know what to do at that time. There was five of us, five boys, in the same class. And there was a priest came over one day and he asked the teacher could they, she, recommend anyone that would like to go to college in, to [named place]. ... She picked out two boys and then she said I think there's a third fella as well she said but he couldn't afford it. [Laughter] We couldn't either. They were farmers y' see the two boys were picked.
- (James b. 1924)

## Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s - Context

- Transition to policy of 'developmentalism'
  - Stagnation and emigration in 1950s gave way to rapid growth in 1960s
  - Expansion of social welfare spending from late 1960s
  - Shift towards 'social insurance' model
- Social structure
  - Increasingly rapid decline in age at marriage
  - Growing opportunities in skilled manual and middle-class occupations (1960s)
- Education
  - Increasing proportion 14-16 year olds in education
  - Farmers 'more effective' in using education system to gain access to new opportunities (Hannan and Commins 1992)

## Growing up in 1950s and 1960s - Themes

- Regret at 'failure' to continue despite parents' ambitions (girls)
- Lack of motivation to continue (boys)
- Some continuation of themes from Cohort 1
- Salience of theme of class discrimination
- I don't know, I think the nuns were too snobbish. Any children whose fathers had good jobs or professional jobs were treated differently than we were. We were put to the back of the class - didn't matter how good we were - we were always put to the back of the class and looked down on is all I can say. Not all the nuns now, but the majority of the nuns had this very snobbish thing
- (Mary b. 1946)

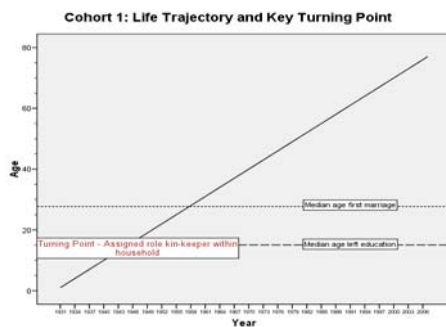
## Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s - Context

- Continued economic growth in 1970s followed by collapse in 1980s
  - Questioning of FDI model, leading to emergence of 'flexible developmentalism'
- Emergence of 'pay-related' welfare state model
  - Severe cutbacks in spending in 1980s
- Social structure
  - Growth in service sector jobs together with decline in manual occupations in 1980s
  - Increased participation of married women in labour force
  - Rapid decline in marital fertility (and increase in non-marital fertility after about 1980)
  - 'Culture wars'
- Education
  - Introduction of 'free' secondary education after 1967
  - Dramatic increase in participation but continued class differences

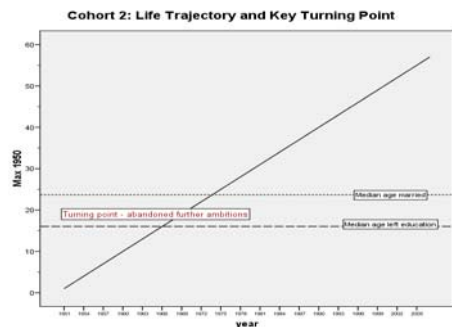
## Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s - Themes

- Fewer cases and thinner narratives
- Continued importance of financial considerations and reference to class differences
- General impression of 'enjoying school' – especially social aspects without strong commitment to education
- Consistent with research by Daly and Leonard (2002)
- INT: In what way [were you a fish out of water]?
- RESP: Just like I suppose in terms of family income, even accents, a lot of that sort of stuff and some of it not quite chips on our shoulders but maybe conscious of not being at the same level so we tended to stick together, not as a gang by any means but I suppose other people would have come from different schools, maybe bigger groups so they would have known each other a lot more. So I did enjoy school. I was fairly good at school up to inter cert and I did enjoy it and I got a lot out of it and I suppose enjoyed the challenge and I used to be involved in tennis and hockey and I did a bit of running and the school choir and things like that as well. I enjoyed that.
- Eileen b. 1969

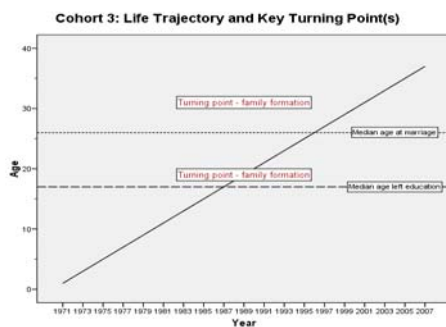
## Composite Narratives – Cohort 1



## Composite Narratives – Cohort 2



## Composite narratives – Cohort 3



## Conclusions

- What can qualitative longitudinal research add? (Millar 2007)
  - Subjective experience of key transitions
  - Methods of coping and adaptation
  - Strategies behind different life trajectories
- Lives and historical times
  - Importance of changing class structure for understanding cohort differences 'starting out'
- Changing significance of 'timing of lives'
  - Lives can be 'mis-timed' in different ways in different historical periods