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Life Times: Children's Perspectives on Age, Agency and Memory across the Life Course
Allison James

Introduction
There is – or at least there used to be – an English saying that ‘your school days are the best days of your life’ and as such, this phrase forms part of the contemporary mythologizing of childhood in England. This widely portrays childhood as a time of happiness, as a time for being carefree and innocent, a time when the world’s woes are held at bay (Gittens, 1998). In this chapter, however, I use the term mythology more deliberately, recalling Roland Barthes's (1976) usage to describe the stories or ‘myths’ that are told about life events and which, in time, become motifs around which particular complexes of ideas are strung or through which particular personae emerge. These cultural myths, which we tell ourselves or which are told to us, provide schemas for our thinking and a charter for our actions.

In this chapter I explore time passing across the life course as a key feature of the mythologizing of childhood through examining the narratives of ageing through which childhood is conceived. First I show how the concept of ‘age’, as a life-course marker, is used by adults to structure individual children’s life-course careers in particular ways to produce particular kinds of childhood identities. I then move on to ask whether children themselves similarly use ideas of age and ageing across the life course as mythologies for the self and, if so, in what ways do they use them? To what extent, for example, do children use memories of past events and the anticipation of events yet to come as age-based schemas for the self, as ways in which particular subjectivities can be narrated and brought into being? And, to what extent therefore, do these temporalized identities work as myths that provide children with charters for the self and for individual action?

In exploring these issues I want to achieve three things: first, to reclaim for children their subjectivity, an ability to be reflexive about their lives and their identities and to articulate this to themselves as well as to others. That children are still rarely credited with this kind of agency, despite the growth in more child-centred perspectives both within and outside the academy, leads to my second reason for examining children’s ideas of age and the life course: to argue that, although the concepts of autobiography or of life history have been most often used by social scientists with respect to adults, they are also pertinent to the discussion of children’s lives, despite the relative shortness of the time children have lived. Finally, I want to consider the extent to which framing children’s thinking and being in this reflexive way, rather than seeing children simply as ‘becomings’ (Lee, 2001), might enable us to question the ‘ageism’ with which children are saddled and which, often, for individual children, poses problems for their everyday lives and social relations (see James and James, 2004).

Age and ageism in childhood
It was the French historian Philippe Ariès (1962) who was one of the first to suggest that modern definitions of childhood are bedevilled by concepts of numerical age when he indicated the extent to which being able to know one’s age is a fundamental necessity of modern life, a bureaucratic demand that comes with every form that has to be filled in. By contrast, in pre-modern times, as Gillis (1996) has more recently argued, the accounting of numerical age played an insignificant role in people’s everyday lives. Schooling, for example, was not simply something which took place in childhood. Instead, those who had access to it – for not all social classes did – might dip in and out of education over a long period of time, as and when it could be fitted in with the demands of family life and making a living. It was only after 1870 that the acute age-consciousness, with which we are now so familiar, emerged. From then on, Gillis notes, ‘so as not to appear unnatural, everyone did their utmost to “act their age” from birth to death’ (Gillis, 1996, p. 84). Thus, as Hockey and James (2002) argue, the precise chronologization of ageing, regarded as a ‘natural’ and unremarkable feature of contemporary representations of the life course, is in fact a relatively recent social phenomenon, a by-product of the rationalization of all aspects of life which industrialization brought with it.

But what did this rigid chronologization of the life course achieve? As Hockey and James (2002) argue, the marrying of biological processes to sequential units of time imposed an orderliness over the changing and transitory physical body, by overlaying the bodily experience of ‘getting older’ with a variety of social meanings and obligations. Thus, for example, it is not simply as a result of the physical ageing process per se, that children leave childhood and become adults. Though their bodies change and mature willy-nilly, the status of ‘adulthood’ has to be socially achieved – in the UK, currently, by reaching the age of 18, the age of legal majority when children can assume ‘adult’ rights and their associated responsibilities. Elsewhere (and despite the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child...
"Adulthood" thus represents primarily a particular social category in the chronologized life course that is highly characteristic of modernity, which may—but need not—reflect processes of bodily maturation (Hockey and James, 2002). In this sense, therefore, the categorical stage of ‘adulthood’ (and therefore correspondingly of ‘childhood’; Jenks, 1996) can be regarded largely as arbitrary, fixed as it is by custom and practices of law. Thus, as Lee (2001) has recently argued, the idea of a ‘standard adulthood’ as completeness is a fiction from the Fordist era, something which potentially is now becoming destabilized by changes in both the economic and intimate lives of adults. It follows then that the social category of childhood is also in many ways arbitrary and not necessarily determined by the age and biology of children’s bodies, despite the increasing push towards standardizing childhood embedded within the discourses of developmental psychology and child health promotion (James, 2005, forthcoming).

Notwithstanding such observations, the social and cultural fixing of a chronologized and numerical identity for children (and adults) within the life course has consequences for our understanding of lives as lived and for the kinds of myths people live by. In the case of children, for example, it is their lack of age which sets them apart and which sequesters them within special child-spaces such as schools and playgrounds while simultaneously denying them access to adult spaces, such as the factory and the pub. Indeed, it is precisely such everyday separatist policies that have lead Mayall to conclude that the ‘study of children’s lives . . . is essentially the study of child–adult relations’ and thus in order to understand childhood, the concept of ‘generation’ must be regarded as key (2002, p. 21). And Mayall goes on to argue for a new concept of generationing, defined by her as ‘the relational processes whereby people come to be known as children, and whereby children and childhood acquire certain characteristics, linked to local contexts, and changing as the factors brought to bear change’ (Mayall, 2002, p. 27).

As noted elsewhere (James and James, 2004), a key driver of this wedge between children and adults has been the discipline of developmental psychology and its assertion of a common developmental and age-based path for all children. Its normalizing remit plots for children a steady progression, over time, of the acquisition of skills and abilities, and while clearly there is some utility in identifying stages of developmental progress, in order to identify any problems a child might be encountering, tying this to a rigid age scheme creates anomalies. Those who fail to make the mark in good time risk being identified as ‘abnormal’. In English this is rendered colloquially in developmental terms as being ‘backward’ or, ‘developmentally delayed’, that is, as being literally behind times (James, 2005, forthcoming). And when this practice is translated into more ‘social’ contexts—used in the UK for example in the target-setting of children’s educational achievements or for judging the ‘age’ at which children can be allowed some agency and participation in their own affairs—its value is even less certain.1

The findings of a recent study of practitioners who work as advocates for children in the courts in Britain illustrates the powerful role that the developmental model has in filtering understandings of children’s competencies and abilities to express their views.2 Practitioners argued, for example, that they would not bother consulting very young children about their wishes and feelings and at only around middle childhood, say nine, ten or eleven years old, did they assume this to be worthwhile and practicable. Younger children, they felt, simply could not be trusted to express a (reliable? truthful?) opinion:

‘I think the child at four is almost at the lower age range really to be doing individual work [with them]’ (Guardian Ad Litem)
‘at the age of twelve you take into consideration what that child is saying’ (Guardian Ad Litem)
‘you’ve really got to go . . . by . . . what that fourteen year old is saying because, in this day and age, they’ll vote with their feet’ (Family Court Welfare Officer)

Summing up his feelings on the matter, one Family Court Welfare Officer remarked:

‘I like to think of it as a sliding scale in terms of the older the child the more emphasis is placed on a child’s wishes and feelings’ (Family Court Welfare Officer)

However, notwithstanding the usefulness of this rule of thumb as a guide for their professional practice, these officers of the court were also well aware that, in everyday life, the ideally snug fit between chronological age and competence was conditioned by a variety of other factors. It was readily acknowledged by them, for example, that the experiences of some individual children might make them more socially mature and thus more able to reflect on their lives than other children; that boys may often be less mature than girls so that gender has always to be taken into account when judging children’s competence in relation to age; and that older children are not immune from manipulation by adults and that therefore their testimonies might not be a reliable or true expression of their wishes and feelings. For these practitioners, then, there was in their everyday work with children always a tension between what childhood ‘is’ and what childhood ‘should be’ as portrayed in a developmentally inscribed life-course trajectory (see James et al., 2004).
Such mythologizing of the age basis of childhood and the determining role which numerical age plays in children's lives is a constant tension with which children themselves have to live and, as Bytheway (1995) has suggested, children might be regarded as victims of a kind of 'ageism', just as elderly people are. Thus, for example, in a recent study of children's time use, 10-year-old children were asked, using a series of age-based vignettes, to consider at what age they thought their parents would let them travel on the bus into town. Most 10-year-olds said that this would happen when they were 12, but, even then, they would only be allowed to travel with friends and not by themselves. To travel alone they would have to be even older. They recalled the time when, as younger children of 7 or 8 years old, they had been allowed to walk to school by themselves but, now that they were 10, they had to negotiate further with their parents in order to be allowed to stay out playing a little longer in the evenings, to stray a little further from their homes or to go to bed a little later. Decisions about all such activities were made by their parents through reference to 'age' and so the children eagerly looked forward to being 16 or 18, the age at which they thought that their mums would no longer be able to tell them what to do. This suggests that a staged developmental and chronologized life course for children is as pervasive in parenting practices as it is in the work of welfare practitioners.

And, as a consequence, it also informs to some degree the ways in which children themselves think about 'age', as time passing, across their own life courses. The children's responses to our questions about age-related activities were, on the whole, fairly similar, albeit there were some gender differences with regard to concepts of maturity. Some girls expressed the view, for example, that girls were more sensible and that therefore they could be trusted to travel alone at 11 years of age, whereas boys were likely to meet other boys and start a fight. Some boys, by contrast, argued that, because boys are stronger, they could be allowed to travel alone at an earlier age than girls. Boys, they reasoned, would be able to get themselves out of trouble more easily than girls. However, many of the children thought that girls and boys ought to be treated the same and, as they talked about these issues, the children revealed their own mythologizing of the sliding life-course developmental scale, mirroring the use made of it by practitioners, as described above:

Martin: 'Cos you can ... go to the shops now [at 10] for your mum but before, when you was younger, then you never, they never used to send you.'

Charles: 'My mam always says: "When you're sixteen, you can do what you want".'

Thus, for children, as well as adults, a developmentally-based, chronologi- cal schema works to mythologize childhood change by providing a charter for action and a cultural framework to think with and through. This is mapped out as the accrual of a series of age-based stages, each of which will move the child inexorably, step by step, towards the greater freedoms, responsibilities and self-determination of adulthood.

Narrative and the life course

However, although children's generalized views of age and change across the life course would therefore appear simply to replicate those of adults, such a model cannot fully account for the rather more ragged truth of children's own individual and subjective experiences of times passed, and indeed their views of time future. Thus, if we are to fully appreciate what 'ageing' means for children we have to explore, with a little more precision, the ways in which children as individuals come to understand, and learn to live with, the chronologized life course through which their lives are culturally narrated. As Rapport has argued: 'a social milieu can be barely comprehended apart from the individuals who compose it at any one time, nor a cultural symbology appreciated apart from the individuals who continue to find it meaningful' (Rapport, 2003, p. 26).

It is, then, to children's more individual perceptions of the chronologized life course that this chapter now turns in order to explore children's perceptions of ageing. In the sections that follow I shall show the ways in which collective expressions about ageing become 'imbued with subjective meanings and are made to serve the interests of [children's] individual perceptions' (Rapport, 2003, p. 26). The stories of the future and the past which children tell about themselves can be seen, therefore, as narratives of the life course, narratives through which children construct their own world view or sense of place in the world. As Christensen (1999) has argued, 'childhood unfolds, empirically, through children's experiences, understandings and practices ...' [and the] multiple, different forces ... that influence their lives' (Christensen, 1999, p. 30). Thus, the potential age-based commonality of childhood, which structures children's experiences chronologically according to the ideas of development and of generation, is open to fracturing by other structural issues, such as class or ethnicity, and by the very diversity of children's own subjective, everyday experiences of the social world.

Adopting such a children's standpoint (Mayall, 2002), therefore, enables an understanding of children's social and psychological 'development' as rather less a matter of the effect of increasing age — of time passing — and rather more as a situated and context-specific experience, along the lines argued by Woodhead (1996) in his radical critique of developmental psychology. And by focusing on the narratives children tell about themselves it becomes possible to see how children, as individuals, interpret and make sense of their ageing selves, for as Rapport argues:
Narrative entails sequence: the placing of data, of details of perception and cognition, in a particular order such that connections are seen between them and an accumulative momentum is gained... There are numerous forms that these stories can take and limitless informational details that they can concern themselves with; what is common to them is the sequential narrational form, and the particular understanding that this form gives rise to. (Rapport, 2003, p. 29)

Children's chronological narratives of the life course

i. The future

I shall consider first the question of how children respond to the process of numerical chronologization through which the life course is often represented and through which, as children, their futures are popularly held to be developmentally determined. To do this I draw on the evidence contained in the time-lines constructed by twenty-two 10-year-old working-class children and consider this alongside other conversations held with children about the ageing process. The children were given two paper charts, entitled respectively ‘My Life’ and ‘My Next Year’ and were simply asked to plot out their lives (see Christensen and James, 2000); in later conversations they revealed other ideas they had about ageing and the life course. These data fragments were collected while carrying out the research into children’s understanding and perceptions of time and, although children’s ideas about the life course were not the main focus of the research, that this data is both rich and evocative is, in itself, indicative of the extent to which children do reflect on their life course and do have a sense of their own active part in shaping it.

A first observation to make is that children’s narratives attest to the importance of chronological thinking about the passing of time in the modern life course for the ways in which ageing is depicted. Although revealing some differences in detail between children, nonetheless, collectively, this can be said to represent a child’s standpoint on the life course (see Mayall, 2002). Thus on the majority of time-lines, although not all, numerical ages are indeed marked out. This suggests that 10-year-old children have begun to envision their lives in terms of the acquisition of numbers of years. On most charts the children inscribed 0 at one end, to represent birth, and 70 or 80 at the other, to represent old age and, for some children, death was indicated by a cross or a picture of a coffin. However, besides these numbers, upon which there appears to be some measure of agreement among the children, there is little other commonality in the numerical reckoning of age other than a tendency to signify the future as the relentless passing of the decades until death – 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70.

That the future is only imaginable as the dull thud of years to be lived through indicates already the importance, for children, of ‘age’ as an experiential, rather than simply chronological status! Interestingly, even 18 – the official end of childhood according to the UNCRC – remains unremarked by children, with the assumption of adult status noted instead as occurring at the age of 20, the first of many future adult decades to live through. One girl writes:

I think in the future I will go to college and live a happy life age: 20

However, for most of these 10-year-old children, the life which lies ahead of them seems not only to be unknown and unplanned but also, in many cases, unimaginable. While some children note that the stages of adulthood and old age are what lie ahead of them, what these periods in the life course might entail is rather unclear. Most children left the future entirely blank, except for marking the inevitably of death in old age. That experience at least is a certainty.

However, some children did visualize the future in terms of chronological age and saw old age beginning at 50 or even earlier. For example, Alan said ‘my grandma’s fifty and she’s old’, while Kim revealed that, in her view, old age begins at 40.

Nora: ‘My dad’s forty.’
Kim: ‘Ooh!’
Allison: ‘You think that’s old do you?’
Nora: ‘No.’
Kim: ‘Yeah, forty is the old, forty’s coming into old.’

However, although the future is of course unknowable (and for most apparently unthinkable!) those children who did reflect on the lives that lie ahead of them did so subjectively, from their standpoint as children. That is to say, their visions of the future draw on their own embodied experiences as children in the world.

Allison: ‘What do you think you’ll be doing when you’re ninety?’
Carl: ‘Sitting in my bungalow.’
Alan: ‘Sitting in a bungalow, reading the paper, like get your walking stick and take vitamins.’
Allison: ‘What do you think it will feel like to be that old?’
Alan: ‘Horrible.’

Kim and Nora agreed that to be 80 would represent being really old and that this would also be a time of physical incapacity:

Allison: ‘Can you imagine being eighty?’
Kim: ‘Might not even be alive.’
Allison: ‘You might not be, but say you were alive, what do you think it
would be like to be eighty?'
Kim: 'You would live in a bungalow.'
Nora: 'Have a set of walking sticks.'
Kim: 'You can’t get to the loo.'

And, at this point, the girls dissolved into gales of laughter.

What do these conversational snippets tell us about children’s subjective understanding of the life course? First, it is clear that old age, like childhood, has its own mythical status, represented here through a set of shared cultural symbols - walking sticks, the need for vitamins, the necessity of living in a house without stairs, and the possibility of becoming incontinent. However, for children, an additional key concern, which reflects their own subjectivities and experience of the ageing process, centres on the changing body: to be so bodily incapacitated, as old people can become, is simply unimaginable and fantastical to children whose own bodies, although also changing, are in the peak of fitness. Being old, you wouldn’t be able to do anything, or more correctly, any of the things, such as sport, that children can do:

Martin: 'A lot of people when they get to ninety they start to get arthritis and things like that, so they wouldn’t be able... to do much sports or anything then, so it would start to get a bit boring.'

Drawing on their own knowledge and bodily experiences as children, the future looks very bleak indeed. However, as noted, for most children the future is in some senses a blank slate, so that when the future is imagined it is depicted either through traditional rites of passage in the life course - getting married, getting a job, having children or retiring - or in terms of fantasies such as winning the lottery. Such transforming events often, though not exclusively, share a similar sequencing, but are not necessarily age-related. It is for instance common that, on the time-lines, jobs appear before marriage and getting a car but there are no common ages attached to these events. However, despite the mythical quality of these narratives - in the sense that they are shared cultural representations of future life transitions - this does not mean that some children do not think about their own futures in more concrete terms. Cora and Amy, for example, have reflected rather extensively on the nature of marriage:

Allison: 'Do you think you'll both get married and have children?'
Cora: 'Yeah, definitely.'
Amy: 'Yes.'
Allison: 'And how old do you think you would be?'
Cora: 'About in my twenties. No younger than that 'cos... you need to get ready for it and be prepared and when you're seventeen you like want to go out and stuff but when you've got children you can't go...'

Amy: '[children] stop you from doing a lot of things until they're a certain age.'
Allison: 'About what sort of age, do you think?'
Amy: 'Til they're about ten or eleven.'
Cora: 'Ten or eleven.'

Another girl, Lorna, is less sanguine about having children. Having at first said that she didn't want to get married and have any children she continued to reflect on these matters:

Lorna: 'I might have a kid when I'm older, but not when I'm younger, 'cos they ruin your life.'

Her friend Susan agrees. Susan's mother has been married three times, the first time when she was eighteen which, she told Susan, was 'a bit too young'. The girls continue to talk:

Lorna: 'You don't have to get married to be together and love each other do you?'
Allison: 'No, you don't.'
Susan: 'But I most probably will get married, when I'm about in my thirties... once I've got my life sorted out.'
Lorna: 'You've done something with your life.'

And not only have the girls reflected on the prospect of having children and the effect this might have on their lives as grown women, but they have also thought about the nature of marital relations themselves. In the following conversation the importance of children’s, albeit second-hand, knowledge and experience as the basis for their thinking becomes clear. Continuing to discuss the restrictions which having children and being married place on women, Amy said:

Amy: '...Because men, they just get to go out and do what they like, they don't care.'
But Cora disagrees: 'They don't though, do they? They go to work and stuff, it's not as if they're not working... It depends who you get married to, don't it?'
Amy: 'Yeah... Laura's just had a baby and her boyfriend he goes to work and he's real helpful, he lets Laura go out on a night... And she lets him go out as well, but he let's her go out, do you know, when she wants to.'

Amy's opening pronouncement of a familiar cultural stereotype - men's (bad?) behaviour in marriage - is challenged by Cora's more temperate and everyday observations. She disagrees with Amy, arguing that men, in fact,
Laura's boyfriend appears to be very much the antithesis of that common category of men, individual men will differ so that, whether a husband cares or not will depend on whom one marries. Amy is persuaded. Indeed, the diversity of the lives and experiences of those adults they knew, to envisage different futures for themselves. Susan told me:

Susan: 'I'm going to try and stay with one person, but I don't know [if that will happen] ... and if you have children when you're young then you can't do anything, 'cos you'll have to look after them.'
Lorna: 'And you can't get a job 'cos they'll be too young.'
Susan: 'But I really want children though, 'cos I love children ... some time like in my thirties.'

Maria, on the other hand, was most definitely set against both marriage and children:

Maria: 'I don't like kids and I don't want to get married ... I don't wanna be like a little housewife who's got to cook, iron and wash and all that lot. I don't mind washing my own clothes ... but I don't think I can be bothered to like wash someone else's clothes.'

Conversations with 10-year-old boys, by contrast, revealed few insights into how they, as boys, conceived of such matters. When I asked Carl and Alan what they might be doing when they were eighteen Carl replied:

Carl: 'Having a job, a car, a girlfriend, a house.'

This short blunt list of future possessions to be acquired was not, however, framed within any context of marriage or relationships. Indeed, both Carl and Alan told me that they didn't want to get married but, when pressed, admitted that they had not really ever thought about it. Other boys were equally vague and noncommittal.

As noted above, a second common feature of the children's depicted futures is getting a job and, once more, girls seem to have reflected far more than boys on what this might entail. Sara, for example, wants to be an actress and intends, when she goes to secondary school to work really hard:

Sara: 'I want lots of homework ... cos, do you know, my big brother, well he hasn't made much of his life. He like sits in and ... I don't think he's got a job still ... I wanna be an actress. I've always wanted to be one since I was a little girl.'

Boys too sometimes expressed views about what kind of job they may have when they become adult, such as becoming a policeman, but, as in their conversations about marriage, they appear to have reflected in less detail about what this might entail or the steps which might need to be taken in order to achieve such ends. These differences suggest, therefore, that girls are more oriented towards the future than are boys. This confirms findings of earlier studies (James, 1993) and recalls Steedman's (1982) analysis of little girls' knowledge of their lives as adults, knowledge drawn from the observed experiences of their own mothers' lives.

The relative blankness of the future, depicted in the 'My Life' time-lines and discussed above, contrasts strongly, however, with the near future depicted on the charts for 'My Next Year'. These time-lines reveal that children not only have quite a detailed knowledge of events which are going to take place during the next year - family birthdays, starting secondary school and going on holiday - but that they also have a sense of purpose and planning, combined with a reflexive and anticipatory view of what is likely to happen to them or things that they wish to do. For example, ongoing regular activities such as going swimming or playing football are marked out alongside wished-for events, such as 'get my ears pierced', 'win some more trophies' and 'get bored of high school'. Thus, although the near future is in one sense more knowable, and therefore easier to think about than the distant future, in terms of children's subjectivities both sets of charts depict children as active agents of change. The children present a narrative account of themselves as people, if not in charge of their own lives, at least with opportunities to take decisions. Thus, in contrast to the passivity of the chronologized, developmental life course through which childhood is often depicted, children's narratives of the self offer us a rather different standpoint: events do not just happen to them, children can also make things happen. But, what then about the past? How do children make sense of this part of their lives? The next section turns its attention to this.

ii. The past

Even though children have lived only a comparatively short quantity of time it is important to consider children as having life histories, and to see them as capable reflexive autobiographers, for what children narrate about their lives can provide insight into not only their individual life experiences, but also into the nature of 'childhood' within the life course as children themselves see it. The significance of this lies in its potential to demythologize 'childhood'; that is, to understand what children, rather than adults, consider as important in their pasts and about the process of 'growing up'.
Recent work on the life course (Hockey and James, 2002) has suggested that the social structuring and chronologization of age is insufficient as an account of how the individual—whether child or adult—identifies himself as aged or ageing. To simply work at the level of categorical identities, as so often happens, for example, when models of child development are used to locate children in the life course (James and James, 2004) is to fail to get to grips with the process of identification itself—that is, the way it is that the social and individual identities of children are inhabited and come into being (Jenkins, 1996). Instead, the process of reflexive embodiment, already illustrated in the examples above, has to be taken into account, for as Hockey and James (2002) argue it is this which facilitates the links between social and individual identities. It is through remembered experiences of times past and the envisioning of the future that people—be they adults or children—come to know that they are ageing. However, though in this sense it can be argued that ‘memory serves as both a phenomenological ground of identity … and the means for explicit identity construction’ (Antze and Lambeck, 1996, p. xvi), the role of memory in identity construction is nonetheless ambiguous. Unconscious processes of selectivity, besides those of simple memory loss, work to shape particular ‘truths’ about ourselves, truths devised to fit or, indeed, to contrast with who we now think we are (Radstone, 2000; Chamberlayne et al., 2000). Antze and Lambeck (1996, p. xvi), for example, ask: ‘If I am constituted by what I remember, what about all that I do not remember but that I know, because of other sources including my common sense tell me, must have been mine? Or what about that which I remember but would prefer to forget?’

Central to the argument put forward by Antze and Lambeck (1996), then, is that memory is a discourse of identity, serving to construct and reconstruct notions of the ageing self. In this sense, then, memory is more than a way of accessing the past. It is also fundamental to the present, and by implication to the future.

In relation to understanding children and ageing this is a critical insight. It helps to free ourselves from the tight hold which the mythology of the developmental model, and its static and staged ageing categories, has over our thinking about childhood. It makes us focus, instead, on the particular embodied experiences of children in particular social and cultural contexts (James and James, 2004). If children’s present knowledge of their ‘selves’ as aged beings is, in part, a function of their memories of previous ages then it matters a great deal both how and what they remember about those life-course moments. As children tell us their memories and make comparisons between themselves then and now, they use their present knowledge and standpoint to make sense of and to interpret past events.

Turning first to the ‘My Life’ time-line, in contrast to depictions of the future, the past features on all of the children’s charts and it is depicted in a rather different way. While chronology emerges as significant, gone is the emphasis on decennial reckoning. Instead, a variety of different and specific ages are identified and, again in contrast to the uniformity of imagined futures, children’s pasts are infinitely more varied and revealed through many different kinds of narratives.

The specific ages identified by the children represent the ages at which significant life-course events, as understood by children, occurred. In this sense the past is recalled not simply as an individual experience but as an individual experience of ‘childhood’, one which is historically and culturally located and therefore collectively shared by children. Thus, for example, five out of the 22 charts identify the start of school; six children record the age at which they got a bike; six children identify accidents and illnesses they have had in the past and six children mention the death of a pet. These suggest a commonality of childhood experiences which can be set alongside more individualized accounts—one child mentions the birth of a sibling, another notes when the family moved house.

However, we also have to ask about absences in these life-course representations. Clearly memory does have a part to play. Some events may simply have been forgotten. But, in addition to this, it may be that some events are not able to be recalled by children as fixed points or moments in time in quite the way demanded by the artificial constraints of the time-line.

For example, the absence on the time-lines of what adults might regard as a key life-course event in a child’s life—parental divorce—suggests that children’s memory of this family event may be rather particular. As an embodied experience, the family split may not have been an event in time, but rather experienced as a process, a process of gradually accumulating knowledge and awareness over time. Thus, Lucy, whose parents’ divorce does not feature on her time-line, nonetheless does remember the time before and after her parent’s separation. But for her it is the changes in the kinds of birthday parties she had which symbolizes these contrasting times:

> When I was little every year I used to have like a party in the back garden where I used to live. I used to have a real big back garden and there was like all my friends from school, like about half of the street went and everything, ‘cos we was like real close to our neighbours. When I was seven, like … my mam and dad had split up and my dad was still living in the old house and I was living with my nana and we just went out … we had like a dinner out … in a restaurant.

In this example, Lucy reflects on how her parents’ divorce changed her life. It clearly had some very practical, experiential consequences—mentioned here, for example, are the loss of a big garden and the loss of friends close by and that sense of a familiar neighbourhood which, as a child, were important to her. However, for Lucy now, at 10 years old, the divorce was also an
integral part of her growing up, and she contrasts the dinner in the restaurant favourably with the more childish birthday parties that she used to have in the garden of the old family home. It may be, then, that the absence on the time-lines of what adults would regard as such a major turning point in a child's life is because of the ways in which children experience them. That is to say, children do not, as such, remember or experience their parents' separation. What they experience instead are its practical consequences, embodied experiences and knowledges through which they, as children, construct a narrative for and about the self.

Just so, with other recalled experiences. The time-lines often highlight highly personal events, rather than those more structured life-course transitions. Thus, although starting school does represent a chronologized life course transition, it is also, for children, a highly personal, sometimes highly traumatic, event in their lives, to be placed alongside other events such as accidents and illness, the death of pets and special birthdays. For children, these are the keys to narrating the child-self. Thus one boy records on his time line the following story:

When I was little I had a big garden and two chickens and I went in the garden. I got bit on my toe. That was when I was two.

A girl similarly records an equally personal and embodied experience:

I remember when I was only about 5 I was on my uncle's shoulders and I fell off and I had to go in an ambulance.

The extent to which these are actually memories is not the issue. Rather such events in the past, just as future events, are the markers in time through which children locate their present selves. They are stories which children tell themselves, about themselves. Sarah has such a story to tell:

When I was three years old I fell out of the bedroom window. Oh, I was in hospital, but I've still got the newspaper from when I actually fell out the bedroom window. I was in a wheelchair. I went to the fair but I wasn't allowed to go on any rides. I can't remember falling out, but I can remember like [being in hospital]. Oh it was real funny. My dad came to stay one night and he slept in the same bed and I fell out 'cos he took up all the space, so he had to put me in this cot and it was a massive cot. I didn't even have a bruise on me. I was scratched ... but I fell on concrete ... I can't remember me falling out, but I can remember 'cos my brothers and that was like messing about and mam told us to go upstairs, so they started fighting on the bed, but not real fighting. And I got real hot so I said 'Can I open the window?' And they said: 'No.' So I asked them again and they said: 'Okay'. Then I opened the window and I sat on the window ledge like that and ... I don't know, I can't remember what happened or anything after that.

Striking about Sarah's story is the absence of a logical chronology in its telling, as she weaves in and around the event itself. But as the narrative develops so Sarah carves out a space and identity for her self as a little girl of three living in a family with older brothers who fight. Whilst admitting throughout her narrative that she cannot actually remember what happened, nonetheless she still feels able to narrate the event in graphic detail. And, as she does, so she places herself at the centre of the action, as a person with agency - she feels hot, she asks twice for the window to be opened and she climbs out onto the window ledge.

Such rememberings of things done 'when they were little' are, then, one of the ways in which children come to an understanding of the life course as, through the past, they are able to locate their present selves. That is to say, as children reflect back on such events they simultaneously distance their older selves from them. As Leanne said:

'Cos you're older and like you see, you look back and you think: 'Oh, that's babyish that.'

I used to like being clinging to my mum's legs: 'Oh, no, please don't leave me.'

This distance between the 'me' then and the 'me' now is quite clear in Charles's memory of getting lost.

I was looking round at the toys and my mam was coming and I went somewhere else to see if I could get me mam and I couldn't find her. I looked everywhere, I couldn't find her. I went to one of the people and asked and I said: 'I'm lost. Can you help me find my mam?' And they said, and they put it on one of them speaker things... It's like in this real big shop... and I was looking at all the sports gear and stuff and then me mam just went out. Me mam went somewhere, outside the shop, to see if I was there. But I couldn't find my mam, so I just sat down in a corner and started crying.

Charles says that he remembers something that happened when he was three years old. But that the event took place in exactly the way Charles narrates it seems unlikely. A three-year-old would not, for example, be able to hold the conversation with the shop keepers as Charles relates it. Moreover, as Charles elaborates on the story he tells us specifically that he was looking at sports gear. This is again something unlikely for a three-year-old to be doing. What does this story tell us then about the past or, more precisely, about the importance of the past to Charles's present life?

First, whether Charles actually remembers this event or not is immaterial. It may be, for example, that this is a family narrative, told and retold,
again and again, as a story about the time Charles got lost. Alternatively, it may be that this event happened to Charles at a point in time much nearer to the present in his own life history, say at eight years old. The picture of the child sitting crying in the corner may be much nearer the ‘truth’ than the portrayal of the cool and responsible child interlocutor of the shopkeeper. It matters not which explanation we choose for what Charles’s story reveals is precisely the process which memory plays in identity construction that Antze and Lambeck (1996) have described. In his narrative 10-year-old Charles uses a story from the past to distance his grown-up self from the little child he once was, be that only a couple of years ago. In this way Charles comes to understand the ageing process, and the ways in which his own development and maturing have taken place. Looking back, just over the space of one year, 10-year-old Lucy achieves a similar and more grown-up sense of her self:

My mum was a bit overprotective when I was about nine, and the shop like across the road, she wouldn’t even let me go. It was only across the road.

Conclusion

These brief fragments of data are, I suggest, indicative of the value to be gained by adopting a life-course and biographical approach in work with children, an approach that can enable us to understand how it is that children experience time passing as ageing across the life course. Despite the brevity of their lives, children have much to say not only about their pasts but also about the plans and ideas they have for the future. In these accounts children position themselves as active agents in the making of their own histories, histories which are both varied and highly contrastive and histories which are the outcome of their participation in the unique settings of their own everyday lives. Such work offers, then, a counterpoise to the determinism of the developmental project which for many, if not all, children works as a strong structuring factor on the ways adults – teachers, practitioners and parents – understand and subsequently endeavour to order their lives for them. This data suggests, therefore, that were we to listen more carefully to the (hi)stories children are able to construct about their life course, we would, as adults, be better placed to assist children in the shaping and determining of their own lives.

Notes

1. It is interesting to note that the latest proposals for educational reform in the UK have suggested an abandonment of the chronology of achievement. The proposed new diploma would be a four-stage qualification that can be taken at any time in the life course.

2. The study, entitled ‘Constructing Children’s Welfare: a Comparative Study of Professional Practice’, was funded by the Economic and Social Science Research Council (2001–3). The project researchers were Adrian James, Allison James and Sally McNamee.

3. ESRC funded project (1997–2000) ‘Changing Times: Children’s Perception and Understanding of the Social Organisation of Time’. The project researchers were Allison James, Pia Christensen and Chris Jenks and the study was undertaken in four schools (two primary and two secondary schools) in urban and rural areas in northern England.

4. This may also be a function of increased parental concern about ‘stranger danger’. It would be interesting, therefore, to compare these ‘age-based’ parental permissions with those of earlier generations.

5. The concept of a time-line is familiar to English schoolchildren, featuring as it does in discussions of history and historical events. In this sense, then, although these methodological devices did of course impose an in-built linearity on children’s conceptualization of the life course, since this is a feature of the way in which time passing is chronologized in the modern life course, this was not perceived as problematic either by us, as researchers, or by the children themselves. The children were able to complete the task easily.


7. This may perhaps explain the differential gap that currently exists in the educational achievements of girls and boys in England. Throughout primary schooling and increasingly during their secondary schooling girls now outperform boys. Perhaps it is in these rather different temporal orientations that one explanation may lie: girls look to their futures, while boys concentrate on their present lives.

8. Adults may well shield children from this knowledge so that this, in itself, will contribute to the piecemeal way in which children may actually have to get to know about changes in family circumstances.

References


