

Young People, Biographical Narratives and the Life Grid:

Young People's Accounts of Parental Substance Use

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Abstract

Research into potentially sensitive issues with young people presents numerous methodological and ethical challenges. While recent studies have highlighted the advantages of task-based activities in research with young people, the literature on life history research provides few suggestions as to effective and appropriate research tools for encouraging young people to tell their stories. This paper explores the contribution that may be made to such research by the life grid, a visual tool for mapping important life events against the passage of time and prompting wide-ranging discussion. Critical advantages of the life grid in qualitative research include: its visual element which can help to engage interviewer and interviewee in a process of constructing and reflecting on a concrete life history record; its role in creating a more relaxed research encounter supportive of the respondent's 'voice'; and facilitating the discussion of sensitive issues. In addition, the way in which use of the grid anchors such narratives in accounts of everyday life, often revealing interesting tensions, is explored. These points are discussed with reference to an exploratory study of young people's experience of parental substance use.

Key words: young people; parental substance use; resilience; sensitive issues; narrative/life history research; task-based approaches; visual tools; life grid.

Introduction

Life history research examining young people's biographical narratives raises important methodological and ethical issues. While the focus of many accounts of narrative or life history research has been on issues of interpretation (Chase, 2005), perhaps less attention has been paid to developing specific tools for inviting interviewees of different ages and backgrounds to tell their stories within a research context. The research reported in this paper focuses on young people who grew up in families affected by parental substance use. Such policy relevant sociological research is often constrained by short-term funding and we were aware that this might compromise a commitment to give voice to those being investigated, allowing them to express their own stories. In order to overcome this, we used an adapted 'life grid'. In this paper, we argue that such a life grid, in providing a visual temporal framework on which life events may be plotted (Parry et al., 2001) may make a useful contribution to the development of research methods and ethical practice in this area.

Initially developed to facilitate the recall of older respondents in quantitative, health-related studies (Blane, 1996; Berney and Blane, 1997), the life grid has also been employed with older respondents in qualitative research (Parry et al., 1999). In this paper, the usefulness of extending the life grid approach to qualitative life history research into sensitive issues with younger, and potentially vulnerable, respondents will be explored. With reference to a study of young people's experience of parental substance use (Bancroft et al., 2004), it will be argued that the life grid is a helpful tool for engaging with young people and supporting them to tell their stories.

The first part of this paper will briefly introduce the life grid, its development and the amendments we made for use with young people. The following sections examine the life grid in our research, focusing first on its advantages in discussing sensitive issues, and second, on exploring respondents' narratives. This second section will also analyse the way in which comparisons between the biographical narratives and everyday accounts elicited through the grid may highlight the complexity within the respondents' accounts.

Introduction to the Life Grid

How the Life Grid has been Used

The life grid is a tool which essentially allows for the construction of a visual temporal framework. It is composed of a 'grid' or 'table' structure, one axis of which represents the passage of time. Selected aspects of the respondents' lives (such as family and occupational history) are represented by columns or rows underneath or to the side of this time axis.

The life grid has been employed primarily in retrospective, quantitative studies with respondents aged over 60. Drawing on the work of Gallie (1988), it has been used to map lifetime exposure to variables linked to the development of chronic respiratory disease and social conditions associated with health inequalities (Blane, 1996; Berney and Blane, 1997). In these authors' experience, the life grid was effective in facilitating the accurate recall of 'simple' facts (such as weight or physiological information):

Cross referencing [between rows or columns] on the life grid enables subjects to improve the accuracy with which dates are remembered [...]. The life grid also appears to release detail from memory by juxtaposing different information from the same period of life (1996: 753).

In other words, completing the life grid works by constructing a concrete visual representation of respondents' recollections of different aspects of their lives, which can then be compared by respondent and interviewer, re-considered and adjusted over the course of the interview.

However, appreciation of the life grid has not been confined to its facilitation of linear, retrospective accounts. In a study of long-term smoking behaviour, Parry et al. (1999) found that it offered significant advantages in addressing key concerns of qualitative researchers. Notably, they argued that the grid has the 'potential to alter traditional interview dynamics' and power relationships (1999: 4.7). In their experience, completing the grid with many older respondents became a 'mutual collaboration'; '[during which] the researcher relinquishes some control over the data collection [and] [...] respondents assert influence over their biographical accounts' (1999: 4.8). Further, although they did not develop these observations, Parry et al., also found that this process of collaboration allowed respondents to reflect upon their interpretations of past events (1999: 2.5) and to ease the discussion of sensitive issues (1999: 4.5).

Why We Used the Life Grid

The qualitative research project on which this paper is based differed from all of the above studies in its focus on young people.ⁱ 38 young people (20 women, 18 men), aged primarily between 16-23, affected by problematic parental substance use (alcohol, illicit drugs or polydrug use) were interviewed across mainland Scotland between July 2002 and March 2004. The study aimed to explore their experience of parental substance use and to examine the concept of resilience within this context.ⁱⁱ

Unlike recent work into young people's construction of adulthood (Thomson and Holland, 2004), this project focused primarily on respondents' constructions of their past, rather than their futures. We felt that examining young people's retrospective narratives of different dimensions of their lives would provide an insight into their sense of resilience or 'self-efficacy or being able to achieve things and make a difference' (Gilligan, 2003). As Mattingly and Garro put it:

Through narrative we try to make sense of how things have come to pass and how our actions and the actions of others have helped shape our history; we try to understand who we are becoming by reference to where we have been (1994: 771).

Narrative researchers have emphasised the association between the development of biographical narratives and difficult experiences (Mattingly, 1994: 813-4). For Riessman, narratives may be constructed where 'there has been a breach between ideal and real, self and society' (1993: 3), while Chase emphasises the need to situate personal experience in terms of cultural and historical discourses (2005: 659). The

importance of reflexive understanding of context at both the micro level of the research interview and the macro level of broad socio-cultural trends is essential to the construction and interpretation of narratives. We hypothesised that the young people in this study might, for example, have developed narratives in order to make sense of perceived breaches between their own experience and cultural discourses of 'the family'.

The rich literature on narrative research therefore proved very useful in conceptualising our approach to examining resilience in the context of parental substance use. However, this work seemed relatively silent as to different ways of encouraging respondents to tell their stories, except through the identification of 'storyworthy' questions in everyday language and relating to life experiences (Chase, 1995: 11-2).

Studies have emphasised how innovative, task-based approaches can grab the interest of even reticent young people, making interviews fun (Thomson et al., 2002: 17; Hight, 2003). Influenced by Parry et al.'s experience, we decided to employ the life grid at the beginning of our interviews, prior to more conventional questions. Our main concern was not to facilitate the linear recall of events, but to engage with the respondents, supporting their 'voice', and encouraging them to tell their stories.

Ethical issues also influenced this decision. In the light of research linking parental substance use with abuse and neglect (Barnard and McKeganey, 2004; ACMD, 2003), we were concerned to minimise potential distress to the respondents, and to avoid reinforcing any negative self-perceptions.ⁱⁱⁱ Parry et al.'s experience that the life grid

could ‘diffuse’ tension around sensitive issues was important here, as was their observation that the life grid could alter interview dynamics, allowing the respondents greater control over the encounter. This ‘meta-narrative’ of empowerment thus influenced our approach to data generation, our reflections on the research process and the construction of young people’s narratives.

Amending the Life Grid for Young People

Our grid, one of which was prepared for each interview, comprised one sheet of A3 landscape paper attached to a clipboard for ease of use where no surface was available. Across the top of the grid was a timeline, under which six rows represented different aspects of the respondents’ lives. To this extent, the grid resembled those employed in previous studies. Our amendment of the grid for our project and for use with young people illustrates the flexibility of this tool.

To counter the difficulty of recalling events over very long periods, previous studies incorporated age-appropriate, memorable ‘flashbulb’ events (Berney and Blane, 1997: 1521), such as world wars and the Coronation into a time-line based on dates (Parry et al., 1999: 2.7). We hypothesised that for young adults, not only were such events irrelevant, but that ages rather than dates would be more appropriate. Influenced by literature on the importance to young people of transitions between schools and to work (Seidman et al., 1994; Graham and Hill, 2003), ages important to the respondents’ Scottish schooling (5, 12, 16) were highlighted in the timeline (from birth to their current age) across the top of the grid. As such, the time axis suggested broad life periods, rather than focusing year by year, as in the example briefly discussed by Elliott (2005: 31).

The headings selected for the horizontal rows also reflected the respondents' age: 'school/work', 'where you live', 'home/family life', 'home and care responsibilities', 'interests, sports and hobbies' and 'service use'. A series of supplementary questions was prepared in relation to each heading to stimulate a broad discussion, not focused on the linear sequence of events, and to avoid the grid appearing 'test-like'. The respondents' schooling, for example, was discussed in terms of their overall experience, involvement in activities, and relationships with teachers, other pupils and friends, as well as the schools attended.

Further we chose not to emulate the approach of other studies in which the grid has been employed by including a specific row for parental substance use. Although the process of obtaining informed consent ensured that it was potentially at the back of the respondents' minds (Miczo, 2003: 476), our aim was to gain a 'holistic' insight into how the respondents situated parental substance use in shaping their biographical narratives, without assuming it had played a dominant role.

Once completed, in nearly all cases by the interviewer, the respondents were invited to consider whether anything important had been omitted from the grid, and to identify the most important, positive and negative influences on their lives so far. These 'biographical' questions were aimed not only at eliciting respondents' narratives of their lives, but also at countering the inherent bias of the grid towards recording discrete life events. Coloured pens were also used here to highlight, add and connect issues raised. The completed grid was left in view for the remainder of the interview in case respondents wished to return to it.

Since the life grid was viewed primarily as a tool with which to facilitate wide-ranging conversations, the rows were often completed in different orders and many discussions cross-cut several of the deliberately broad areas represented on the grid. The grid conversation generally constituted between 25-40% of the interviews, which lasted for between 56-125 minutes; with a mean length of 88 minutes. All of the interviews were carried out by SW and were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim^{iv}, including pauses and mood. Interpretations of the transcripts, including the grid discussions, were analysed through frequent team discussions and coding into NVIVO (Bancroft et al., 2004: 2). The respondents' stories were analysed both through thematic analyses of the narratives produced and narrative analysis of their structure (Thomson and Holland, 2004: 17). What has been described as a 'narrowly structuralist' approach to tightly defined narratives (Chase, 2005: 656) was not employed.

Using the Life Grid with Young People: Interview Dynamics and Sensitive Issues

Parry et al. (1999) emphasise how the life grid may increase respondents' degree of control within the interview encounter and diffuse tension around sensitive issues. This section focuses on these issues in our research with much younger and sometimes vulnerable respondents. We found that the life grid was instrumental in 'breaking the ice' at the beginning of the interviews, and that it afforded respondents a degree of control over the disclosure of sensitive issues. It also sensitised the interviewer to difficult issues for individual respondents, while avoiding reinforcing any self-perceptions of stigma. In this sense, the grid may be seen as supporting the 'voice' of potentially vulnerable respondents (Chase, 2005: 667).^v

Breaking the Ice

The physical logistics of completing the grid often led interviewer and respondent to sit next to each other, or at a slight angle, sometimes on the floor. This engendered a helpful degree of informality, perhaps countering, to some extent, the respondents' perception of the interviewer as an authority figure. The physical dynamics of grid completion also averted the need for sustained eye contact early in the interview. It was the interviewer's strong perception that this was effective in putting both interviewer and younger respondent at ease when discussing sensitive issues, and particularly important in interviews with respondents of the opposite sex. At the same time, it seemed that, for several young men, the production of a concrete (quasi-scientific?) record of the discussion bolstered the importance of the interview and their role in it.

Additionally, those respondents who had used similar techniques with social workers seemed to welcome the grid as a familiar and reassuring element of the interview:

I: This is called a life grid [....]. It's just a means of helping to talk about what's happened over the [..] years.

R: Like a life plan [..] I done one of them a couple of weeks ago. [...] With my support worker [...] and a few other people. (Kate, 19, father alcohol user)^{vi}

Respondent Disclosure of Sensitive Issues and Control Over the Interview Encounter

In our study, few respondents wanted to complete the grid themselves, some specifying that they did not like writing. As such, the high degree of interviewer-respondent 'mutual collaboration' experienced by Parry et al. (1999) in their interviews with older respondents was not reproduced.

Importantly, however, the respondents did use the open-ended life grid discussion to raise sensitive issues at their own pace, rather than the interviewer's. In fact, they talked about many difficult issues, including sexual abuse of family members and suicide attempts, that were not addressed by any subsequent interview questions.^{vii} These issues might have emerged through open-ended interviewing alone, however the presence of the grid, and physical focus on it during this part of the encounter, seemed to reassure the respondents both that they were being taken seriously and that their lives would not be seen only in terms of the issues raised about the effects of parental substance misuse.

The grid therefore permitted these potentially sensitive issues to be addressed in a less confronting way than through long lists of personal questions. Discussion around schools attended and places lived often led into conversations about parental separation and social services involvement, issues often relevant to these respondents' lives. This avoided the need for direct questions such as 'Are your parents still together?' or 'Have you ever been in care?', which might have reinforced respondents' perceptions of being stigmatised. Further, since the respondents, rather than the interviewer, raised these issues first, the life grid discussion seemed to constitute a kind of 'permission' given by the respondent to return to them later in the interview (Parry et al., 1999: 4.5). In these limited, but important, ways, the respondents could take a greater measure of control over, or a less passive role in, the presentation of their life stories in the interview.

Two respondents did not give this ‘permission’, recoiling from certain issues. We would argue, however, that this reaction did not relate to the grid itself, but to their continuing emotional trauma at these issues, a reaction also observed in narrative-based research into sexual abuse and torture (Riessman, 1993: 3-4).

Contemporaneous fieldnotes support this interpretation:

One of the most difficult interviews I have done. She seemed definitely to want to be interviewed, but her demeanour would change when conversation lead to her heroin- injecting father. Her face seemed to harden into a protective, somewhat aggressive, empty expression. (Kelly, 22, father drug misuser).

Non-Stigmatisation of Respondents

The open-ended life grid discussion also alerted the researcher to upsetting issues for respondents, which would require particular care when addressed later in the interview, or which could be avoided completely, if requested. This was important from an ethical perspective. It also allowed the researcher to avoid imposing her own assumptions regarding ‘sensitive issues’ on the interview encounter. For example, educationally-privileged researchers are likely to assume that periods in residential school represent a ‘sensitive issue’. While this was the case for some respondents, two respondents painted this experience in a very positive light, for example:

I: Why did you like those teachers there?

R: Because [...]you [could] call them by their first name [...]. It was a laid back school. It was brilliant. (Ryan 19, father alcohol user)

Completing the life grid therefore allowed the researcher to avoid approaching a potentially sensitive issue ‘over carefully’, thereby subtly undermining the respondents’ own perceptions of the issue itself or the ways they had addressed it.

Finally, the discussions around the life grid generated a more holistic view of respondents’ lives than is often produced by more direct questioning, however open-ended. Completing the row on extra-curricular activities allowed several young men with few qualifications, criminal records and heroin habits to recall positive events in their lives, such as sporting prowess or close friendships. Recording these activities visually seemed to convey a more genuine interest in respondents’ lives as a whole than would the inclusion of a few additional questions which may appear patronising or ‘tokenistic’.

In our experience, therefore, the life grid made an important contribution to the ethical and sensitive conduct of interviews with young and potentially vulnerable respondents. The following sections will focus on the narratives elicited using the grid and the process by which they were produced.

Collecting Biographical Narratives Using the Life Grid

In our experience, the life grid proved an effective tool with which to elicit the young people’s biographical narratives. They responded to the opportunity to construct and reflect on a visual and temporal record of their lives with enthusiasm, thereby facilitating a more detailed and sustained exploration of the selected aspects of their everyday lives than is often possible through conventional questioning, which may quickly become repetitive and potentially boring. In the following sections, we also

explore the advantages of encouraging storytelling while focusing on everyday activities and contexts, and argue that this dual approach highlighted interesting tensions between the respondents' accounts of the everyday and their biographical narratives.

Encouraging Young People to Tell their Stories Using the Life Grid

In practice, the respondents' story telling seemed to be facilitated by both the process of construction of a concrete, visual representation of their lives, as well as subsequent reflection on this record in response to the previously mentioned 'biographical questions'.

Several respondents quickly recognised the potential of the grid to represent the structure of their life stories visually, for example to reflect sudden or profound changes. Martine provided the following biographical narrative while her responses to initial questions about her schooling were being represented on the grid. Unlike respondents whose parents had used substances throughout their upbringing, she focused her story around one crucial year:

I: And how about stuff out of school, like?

R: Em they were fine until I was about 14.

I: Yeah?

R: And that's when like my dad got the jail and then my mum went kind of off the rails. But everything was fine till I was about 14. [...] We had a brilliant life, [...] really happy. (19, mother alcohol user)

She insisted that the researcher draw a vertical line crosscutting each row of the grid to illustrate the significant effects of this year's events on all aspects of her life. The grid seemed to encourage her not only to tell her story, but to think about how to best represent and reinforce it visually.

The 'biographical' questions employed after completing the grid might have been posed in any semi-structured interview concerned with resilience. However, it seemed that the respondents' responses to being asked to identify the most important, positive and negative influences on their lives were facilitated by having a visual representation of their lives to hand. For example, Euan's response to these questions presented a narrative of his life being turned upside down, destroying a previously happy childhood. Reflecting on his parents' separation and his mother's subsequent relationship with a 'junkie', he seemed to translate the grid into an image of powerlessness to move away from the past:

I: I knew there wasn't enough space (on grid).

R: Not for my life's story there's not [laughs wryly] (18, mother drug user)

In contrast, some young people responded to these questions with future-oriented narratives of how their lives had 'turned around' and disassociated themselves from events recorded on their grid. One respondent pointed to an encounter with a psychologist as pivotal to changing her vision of herself and her future:

[before] I thought I'd always be, always be miserable [...]. And my life was too centred on what was going on with my [parents]. [...] And I wasn't thinking

that I could do my own life without that being in it. (Jenny, 19, stepfather alcohol user)

Similarly, when asked about the most positive influences on or events in his life, Robbie related:

R: When I was on the drugs, I thought to myself I'm no gonna get nowhere. I'm just going to be like a downer and a junkie [...] always. But I got off the drugs and calmed doon a bit with the drink [...] got myself on my feet. Got my flat and got my-my course. [...]

I: OK. And I mean those are all really recent [looking at grid]. So anything good before that?

R: Nuh. (18, stepfather alcohol user)

Their responses to the completed grids and subsequent biographical questions therefore generated narratives relevant to our interest in resilience, of how the respondents perceived their lives to be going, and of the effects of difficult past events on their current and future lives.

These questions, and another where we probed about any important omissions from the grid, were also important in countering one disadvantage of the grid's visual nature, namely its potential to orient discussion towards discrete life events at the expense of longer-term or more diffuse influences. This last question prompted reflections on the importance of particular people or pets in their lives:

My world revolved roond my gran, but she died. [...] I used to go to my gran's every weekend because I didnae like staying in the house. (Martine, 21, mother alcohol user)

Linda used this opportunity, as follows, to mention another influence, difficult to represent visually:

Just I was really violent when I was younger eh. (19, father alcohol user)

These answers further highlight the potential for using a visual tool such as the grid to elicit life histories, but also to re-approach these visually recorded histories from different perspectives, in a manner interesting to the respondent. In the remaining parts of this section, the use of the life grid to produce narratives embedded in accounts of the respondents' everyday lives will be discussed.

Using the Life Grid to Produce Anchored Narratives

The respondents' enjoyment of the grid discussion, and the temporal and visual frameworks constructed through its use, also contributed to a willingness to provide detailed accounts of their everyday lives. These accounts could then be compared with the respondents' biographical narratives. The advantages to our research of this dual approach will also be analysed.

Encouraging Detailed Accounts with the Life Grid

Starting the grid with the row on schools often served to construct a temporal framework of schools attended. This framework seemed to counter a tendency,

observed in relation to more conventional questioning elsewhere in the interview, for respondents to focus on the recent past. It also provided a powerful and reassuring memory hook for respondents, even those whose early lives were characterised by complex family and living arrangements. With some assistance, respondents narrowed down the period in which they recalled particular events taking place with reference to it:

R: My dad moved out later on as well.

I: How old were you then?

R: Don't know [laughs] Cannae keep track.

I: Were you at primary school or?

R: Oh yeah! I was in primary seven. (Steven, 15, mother alcohol user)

They also used this framework to incorporate what others had told them about early events in their lives. Typically, Leanne's reconstruction of the timing of her parents' separation was aided by comparing her own and others' recollections with starting school:

I: When did you stay with your dad?

R: [...] Just before I started school [...]

I: OK. And your mum and dad were still together at that point?

R: No, [they] had broke up and I was staying with my dad for a year.

I: [...] You thought they'd broken up when you were about 6, so was it a bit earlier than [...]?

R: Ehm, it must have been ...[...][when]I was about 4, yes (17, mother alcohol user)

Recording recollections of schooling therefore provided an effective, age-appropriate temporal framework to which the respondents often referred when completing the grid.

The above quotation also illustrates the way in which respondents ‘cross-referenced’ visually between information in different rows of the grid. Berney and Blane analyze this process in terms of ‘minimising recall bias’ (1997). Here our focus was primarily on how this visual tool bolstered respondents’ confidence and interest in telling their stories. Similarly, the respondents could also use the readily accessible, visual record of their life stories to answer in shorthand, avoiding the need to engage in repetitive explanations:

R: I was born in, [...] - here [pointing] [...] which is my hometown [...] in a hospital not very far from [city] [...]. I stayed there until I was three. [...]. And [then] went to [England] until I was nine. [...] And back to that place [pointing]. (Jenny, 19, stepfather alcohol user)

The Inter-relationship Between Respondents’ Narratives and Accounts of Everyday Life

The temporal and visual frameworks associated with the life grid therefore appeared to assist respondents in telling their stories and constructing detailed accounts of everyday life. The content of the narratives produced, for example with respect to

parental substance use and their relationships with their parents, could then be compared with these accounts and answers to subsequent questions, often revealing interesting tensions. In this way, the life grid may be seen as highlighting ‘voices within each narrative’ (Chase, 2005: 663) or the complexity within the respondents’ stories.

First, it was notable that several respondents’ narratives did not prioritise parental substance use, but highlighted other concerns, such as another parent’s physical or mental illness. This was sometimes the case even where answers to subsequent questions suggested that a parent’s substance use problem had been severe. Such comparisons led us to reflect not only on the range of issues some respondents faced, but also on their preference for focusing their life histories around one, rather than several difficulties.

In contrast, when Rachel was asked about her schooling, she responded:

I’d only be there [school] for a [..] time and then I’d have to go home and look after my mum. [..] Do the dishes [..] the clothes [...] Em my mum [..] lying steaming on the couch and I’d have to cook [...] And Hoover [...]. Tak[e] my mum tae the bathroom. (17, mother alcohol user)

Similarly, when asked whether she had pursued interests away from home:

R: Nuh.

I: [...]Youth [...] or sports groups?

R: Nuh. Nothing. Just basically look after mum 24:7.

As for many respondents, the focus of the grid on several everyday activities provided Rachel with a means of underlining biographical narratives dominated by parental substance use. Her responses to the subsequent 'biographical' questions further confirmed the importance of her caring role to her sense of self, and the difficulty of, as she put it, 'breaking the chains', that linked her to that role.

In several cases, there were tensions between the respondents' accounts of the everyday and their narratives of their relationships with their parents. Like many respondents, Mia was proud of her caring role, and referred to her mother's drugs problems only incidentally in accounts of her everyday life, for example:

I So when did you start doing [the housework]?

R [...] I was able to use a washing machine when I was six or seven [...], the frying pan when I was like ten. [...] I looked after [siblings] eh [when] my mum [...] ended up in hospital. So I like took-took over [...] 'cause my stepdad wasn't there [...]

I And how old were you [then]?

R Em, between 12 and 13.

I [...] Your mum was in hospital for quite some time then?

R Yeah. It was just like [...] [the] amphetamines she was on. [...] She ended up having a nervous breakdown. (19, mother and stepfather polydrug users)

These remarks were, however, immediately preceded by this somewhat contradictory comment:

Llike she's never, ever believed in hitting any of us kids, eh [...]. She's always made sure we're bathed, fed, clean bed [...] Even though she done a' that [amphetamines] eh, [...] She was a good, she is a good mum eh.

In some instances, this tension was evident to the respondent, providing an example of the reflection prompted by the use of the grid:

R: The drink never affected my like....wellbeing and stuff. My mum, she always done her best in me [...] always made sure that I was at school and that I had nice clothes and she would have my tea ready and [...] Just..because she was drinking [...] she used to get aggressive.

I: Right

R: She wouldnae hit me but she used to shout at me a lot [...] and I'd be scared to bring my friends round [...] and I'd be worried about her health. (Leanne, 17, mother alcohol user).

These two women's narratives suggested strong loyalty to mothers they felt had cared about them, whatever the level of care they had actually provided and in spite of their substance use. Respondents' answers to conventional questioning later in the interview often revealed similar tensions. For example, Martine's picture of a 'brilliant life' before she was fourteen, cited above, was nuanced when she later recounted that her mother had abandoned her for periods prior to this age.

These tensions therefore suggested the complexity of the narratives through which the respondents presented themselves and their relationships with others. These tensions might have emerged through conventional semi-structured interviewing. However, it is argued that the dual approach afforded by the grid, in focusing on everyday activities within a narrative-based approach, facilitated their appearance.

Discussion

Little of the narrative literature focuses on methods, beyond highlighting the importance of an open-ended approach. In the light of studies employing task-based approaches in research with young people (Morrow, 2001; Punch, 2002) and accounts of the life grid in qualitative research (Parry et al., 2001; Airey, 2002), we incorporated this tool into our semi-structured interviews with young people affected by parental substance use.

In practice, we found the grid, and the physical dynamics associated with its use, assisted in avoiding embarrassment, building a relationship between interviewer and respondent and facilitating discussions supportive of the ‘voices’ of young and potentially vulnerable respondents (Chase, 2005: 665). Notably, the informal, wide-ranging discussion engendered afforded the respondent a degree of control over the pace and manner of disclosure of the difficult issues many had encountered. This process also highlighted issues that were sensitive for particular respondents, avoiding assumptions that might undermine the respondents’ own perceptions.

The life grid proved equally effective in eliciting and representing young people's biographical narratives. Many of these narratives seemed to have been constructed prior to the research encounter, a few in therapeutic settings, and might have been elicited in response to conventional semi-structured interviewing. However, the grid seemed to encourage storytelling and provided a vehicle through which respondents, who recognised its visual potential, could reinforce their narratives.

It is not suggested that the dual approach of the grid may resolve the relationship 'between a life that is lived and a life that is told' (Thomson et al., 2002: 339). However, the comparisons it affords between the respondents' accounts of the everyday and their biographical narratives permitted a greater appreciation of the complexity within each respondent's 'voice' (Chase, 2005: 663) and the importance several accorded to healing the gap between their own and ideal family life.

In conclusion, the life grid, as has been described, requires careful use to avoid focusing only on linear recall or on discrete events, thereby excluding other potentially significant influences (Bell, 2005). A blank grid might also intimidate respondents with particularly complex life histories or poor literacy skills, if asked to complete the grid themselves.^{viii} Future work may develop use of the life grid further, perhaps to assist longitudinal work (Elliott, 2005) or as a tool of 'visual sociology' (Bell, 2004); for example, completed grids might be analyzed as data in themselves, perhaps through attachment to an analysis package such as NVIVO as an image file. In our experience, however, the life grid, alongside more conventional open-ended interviewing, can make a useful contribution to studies with young people, in which biographical narratives are important.

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ⁱ *Risk and Resilience: Older Children's Experience of Parental Substance Use Problems* supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Drug and Alcohol Programme, 2002-04.

ⁱⁱ This focus on resilience influenced our recruitment strategy. While some respondents were contacted through an NHS substitute prescription organization and community drugs organizations, more were recruited through universities, as well as more generic youth organizations.

ⁱⁱⁱ These concerns were reflected in our recruitment and consent procedures. We also researched contact information for support organizations in all the different areas in which we interviewed in case respondents became upset.

^{iv} Identifying details were removed from the transcripts.

^v As Chase (2005) notes, issues of voice are complex and we would not wish to imply that young people's voices are unproblematically expressed and understood through narratives developed in a research interview. We do not analyse them as authentic representations of experiences or perspectives but rather as co-constructions where our interpretive procedures also contribute both during and after the interview.

^{vi} Pseudonyms are employed throughout.

^{vii} In some cases, the respondent indicated that they had not 'meant' to talk about these issues. These respondents were reassured that they did not have to talk about these issues if they preferred and that they could be omitted from the interview transcripts.

^{viii} One of the respondents had attended five primary schools and five secondary schools. He had been placed with five sets of foster parents and in six residential homes.