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CHAPTER 10

Constructing and researching the object in time and space

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What is time? Things change, and time is how we keep track.

JAMES GLEICK, 2016: 269

Introduction

The dimensions of time and space are inherent in sociological inquiry but are considered in varying ways and degrees in different theories and methodologies. Since the phenomena that sociologists investigate mainly comprise what the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking has coined the ‘interactive kind’ (1999: 32), they come into existence as patterns or dynamics of human interaction. As these patterns and dynamics are conditioned by time and space, they are open to change and seldom repeat themselves in exactly the same form. In national statistics, this ongoing change appears in the well-known problems of maintaining the same definitions, variables, and values over time, which need to be rethought and sometimes changed to remain relevant. Conceptual sociology may experience this challenge through the use of concepts and theories, which also emerge from specific historical contexts and, thus, can be described as ‘chronotopes’: particular forms characterised by intrinsic connections between temporal and spatial relations (Bakhtin, 1981). Thus, the objects of sociological inquiry are constantly in motion: what you observed, described, and

explained yesterday may be gone or at least changed today, including the relevance of your own research perspective. In the words of Max Horkheimer:

The facts which our senses present to us are socially formed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ.

HORKHEIMER, 1937, in CONNERTON, 1976: 213

The different sociological approaches to the issues of time often follow the micromacro dualism, that is, changing structures *or* changing acts. In Giddens' theory of structuration, time plays a central role in the effort to bridge this dualism and understand the 'processual structuring' of social structures and the 'dynamic stabilisation' of actors (Giddens, 1984). However, as the Norwegian sociologist Sverre Moe (2010) argued, the actual forward movement of societal structures in historical time tends to be lost as the temporal character of the processes of structuration are seldom given any specificity. The same could be said about Giddens' theory of the modern self and its relationships (Giddens, 1991), which gives attention to the *mechanisms* of self-identity (reflexivity, life narratives, control of time, risk balance, pure relations, and so on), rather than to the historically situated biographical self. The abstract notion of the self makes it difficult to define what actually drives subjects in the processes of structuration and what the outcomes may be. Thus, Giddens' theory helps us to see the temporal connection between structure and self, where as his concept of time—both in regard to social and psychological structures—stays diachronically weak and analytically tied to the situation.¹

In this chapter, I argue that a longer perspective on how empirical subjects interact with the institutional and cultural conditions of their time may reveal more detail of the processes of social change and give a broader perspective on the actions of the present. A premise for my analysis is that psychological and institutional structures represent different *forms* of the social that should neither be radically separated nor reduced to each other. Subjects are historically and biographically formed. Subtle and gradual processes working on the level of subjectivities may provide a psychological readiness for cultural and political change and, thus, be a vital

¹ This analytical focus is also evident in the figure of structuration in Giddens (1984), where the relation between the unacknowledged condition of an action, the agent's reflexive monitoring of this action, and the unintended consequences of the action is visualised as a circular movement, not as a forward-moving timeline.

part in social dynamics (Horkheimer, 1937; Williams, 2011; Aarseth, 2008; Nielsen, 2017). The question I want to raise is: what may we learn about the subject as a research object, its historical character, and its way to interfere with historical change if we are more attentive, methodologically as well as theoretically, to different ways in which time enters into the lived experience, including in the sociological quest for knowledge?

Time as event and biography

In Oslo, Norway, there is a huge park, Frognerparken, which is home to a permanent sculpture installation by the Norwegian sculptor Gustav Vigeland (1869–1943). One of the great artworks in this park, it comprises 36 granite sculptures of human beings together in different situations, ages, and phases of life in the movement from birth to death, placed in three rising concentric circles, with twelve sculptures in each circle around a huge monumental monolith. Each of the sculptures capture an impressively lively moment of relationships between people, an event characterised by emotional states of joy and laughter, sadness or boredom, fear and conflict. In one of the childhood moments, we see a circle of girls with their heads close together in a whispering formation while excluding a little boy who wants to join in. The boys are depicted with more playfulness, laughter, and more aggression, and no girls try to join in here. Further on in the life cycle, we see heterosexual couples approach each other in ambivalence of fear and attraction, including some sculptures with men being violent towards their female partners. At older ages, the women and men appear to find their way back to their single-gendered groups and comfort in each other. Vigeland's depiction of the different ages and genders are archetypal and stereotypical, with a focus of the traditional family as a basic unit and life as a repeating cycle that seamlessly continues at the point of the circle where the old die and the new are born. There is presence, relationships, and flow in each sculpture, but no individuality or socio-historical context (Wikborg, 2010). The *historical character of the perceiving organ* (cf. Horkheimer) of Vigeland makes itself very clear: the works were created in 1930s and 1940s Europe, a period where this type of archetypal depiction of the strong and healthy human—often, as also the case here, in supernatural size—and a naturalised and heterosexualised hierarchy between man and woman, were popular, including in artistic expression. This universalistic perspective evidently contributes to the blurring of the *historical character of the*

object perceived. However, the sculptures still portray something about how time transcends the dynamics of the single event. I suggest that the fascinating power of Vigeland's artwork is exactly this combination of flow and liveliness of action in the situation of each separate sculpture and the biographical timeline they form when seen together and imagined as depicting a lifeline.² How did one event extend into the next? How does the dynamic of a situation transcend into long-term effects? Event and biography may be understood as representing two different kinds of time in a subject's life: the *synchronic* and the *diachronic*. Synchronic time contains the flow of human action/interaction in a given situation, while diachronic time grasps the irreversible movement forward in time, from birth to death. This doubleness of time is captured in Bergson's (1911) distinction between 'durée' (duration, the experience of temporality) and 'temps' (abstract chronological time). Norwegian anthropologist Anders Johansen (2001) suggests the concepts 'time of the action and events' and 'abstract time' to be useful in socio-cultural analyses. The advantage of connecting concrete time to action is that the present is not defined as simply an evermoving point on the line between past and future, gone before we ever had a chance to notice or describe it, but rather is tied to the meaning(s) of the specific action that we engage in. Johansen describes practical tasks, such as planting, harvesting, or cooking, but as Vigeland's sculptures illustrate, they may also be thought of as situations of play, communication, competition, conflict, violence, love, illness, etc. In short, the present is an event or a social situation, not a chronological moment, and, thus, from a sociological perspective, it is sensible to attach temporality to the present itself, not only to the line from the past into the future.

The arrow of time

The two aspects of time—the synchronic 'time of the action' and the diachronic 'abstract time'—are not mutually exclusive concepts.³ The 'time of the action'-type of time is present in all societies, as no society can survive without concrete, practical, and meaningful human action/interaction, but as all known societies also have some

² One may also read the sculptures as a cross-sectional sample; however, as they are stripped from any historical context, these two readings blend into each other as a story of human life where generational shifts and individual life courses through the different ages become the same story.

³ Yoga could be an example of how one may simultaneously be engaged in the presence of the action and in a longer forward perspective. One may practise yoga to calm stress and improve one's capacity to be present with one's body and mind in the moment; however, one probably also does this because one believes it will be good for one's health in the long run.

kind of understanding of time that exceeds these daily situations, these two time concepts are not mutually exclusive. Still, the emphasis of abstract time has gained importance in complex societies where planning and coordination between different actors and institutions called for greater temporal synchronisation. In modern, capitalist society, the emphasis is on time as a force and a resource to exploit, rather than being an inherent part of the action or the event (Luhmann, 1995; Eriksen, 1999; Johansen, 2001; Moe, 2010). Abstract time may be described as empty, chronological time, as a resource to be used, but also as an irreversible and one-direction ‘arrow of time’ that no living beings or societies can stop nor escape.⁴ As the American physicist Lee Smolin formulated, we have a choice about where we move in space, but no choice about which moment to inhabit (Gleick 2016: 265). When situated historically, abstract time follows a linear movement, not a circular one, as suggested in Vigeland's cosmology. In the specific modernist conception of linearity, it is connected to determinism, development, enlightenment, progress, and money, but one does not have to subscribe to this logic to agree that time, in the abstract sense, transcends the situation and moves irreversibly and thus in a ‘linear’ fashion in only one direction.

Even though abstract or diachronic time in this sense is linear, it may, however, also at the same time be *heterogeneous*, involving different temporal strands moving at different paces and in different spaces. Norwegian cultural historian Helge Jordheim (2012a) argues that the synchronic moment is always filled with experiences, objects, and practices that are uncontemporary with each other because they belong in different diachronic contexts and processes, in a thought that was introduced by historians in the second half of the 20th century.⁵ German historian

⁴ ‘The arrow of time’ is a concept of astronomy and physics developed in the 1920s and involving the ‘one-way direction’ or ‘asymmetry’ of time leading into disorder. The popular image is that ‘one cannot unscramble eggs’ or expect an evaporated liquid from a cup to return to the cup by itself. As a theory of energetic outlet and increasing disorder (entropy) in the universe, the arrow of time does not fit well to historical processes, which appear rather to move towards increasing differentiation and complexity (Eriksen, 1999). However, the arrow of time still makes sense in terms of the before/after dichotomy and in relation to historical events. It also encompasses the experience that, no matter how they are socially constructed, children become adults, whereas adults do not grow into children, other than in a metaphorical sense. Much of the entertainment value of films like *Big*, *Billy Madison*, and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* lies in our experience of this irreversibility. (Gleick, 2012, Nielsen, 2016).

⁵ A central name here is Ferdinand Braudel of the French Annales school, who suggested that there are at least three levels of time that make up the historical process: the rapidly changing and shifting eventtime, the time of social and economic structures, and cycles with a much slower rhythm in the ‘longue

Reinhart Koselleck further developed these thoughts with the concept of ‘Ungleichzeitigkeiten’, that is, instances of non-synchronicity or noncontemporaneity: ‘The diachronic organizes itself in terms of multiple overlapping layers, which run contrary to the conventional periods and opens up for different combinations’ (Koselleck, 2006, cited in Jordheim, 2012b: 156).⁶ Hence, diachronic time may also be present in synchronic time and give situations ‘a historical depth, which is not identical with their chronology’ (Koselleck, 1972, cited in Jordheim, 2012b: 170). The crossing diachronic lines in the present contribute to creating some of the wider contexts of meaning that are inherent in our acts. In our research on gender in change (see the following section), my colleague Monica Rudberg and I described, much in the same vein as Koselleck, the different and uneven changes in gender identities, gendered subjectivities, and the sociocultural possibilities of young women at different historical moments as ‘lacks of contemporaneity’ (Nielsen and Rudberg: 1994, 108–109).

The idea of the multi-layeredness of time and meaning is a perspective we can also find within psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity. The singular subject emerges as layers of interpretation from different points in time, as a formative sedimentation in which old interpretations are not just replaced by new ones but exist as possibilities in a person's psychic universe. Incompatible conscious and unconscious interpretations may be seen as pressing towards change or they may emerge as symptoms (see Nielsen, 2016). Thus, subjectivity is here understood as a temporal phenomenon enfolding in the interaction between past, present, and future. Combining synchronic and diachronic time and awareness of the heterogeneous character of time are also fruitful perspectives for sociological analysis. If linear time is abandoned or reduced to the ongoing synchronic flow in the present, we lose insight into the long-term effects of action and the historical formation of subjectivity. This may happen in sociological case studies on either the micro- or macro-level, or it may be seen in some research inspired by poststructuralist epistemology, where any kind of object or subject stability is defied. On the other

durée’ of landscapes and geography or slowly changing mind-sets and mentalities (Jordheim, 2014: 502. See also Sandmo, 2016).

⁶ Jordheim (2012b) argues that Koselleck deconstructs the idea of linear and homogeneous chronological time and replaces it with a more complex, heterogeneous, and multi-layered notion of temporality (151). I agree that Koselleck’s approach defies homogeneity and linear determinism, but not necessarily the linear direction of time. Also a multi-layered and complex object moves and is constricted by the ‘arrow of time’.

hand, a purely diachronic view disregards the ways different layers of time are present in the subject or situation. This may lead to an understanding of subjectivity or societal forms as determined and coherent and, in this way, also miss out the tensions and dynamics that may push towards social change. Jordheim (2012a) gave a vivid description of how the separation of the two concepts of time may be seen in the inverse relationship between anthropology and historical research:

To think historically in categories such as development, growth, event, continuity, change, durability, rupture, stability, etc. is a challenge within the fields of anthropology; to think culturally analytically, in categories of equality and difference, identity, insides and outsides, borders, structures, etc. is an equally big challenge within the field of history. Probably it has to do with how scholars of these academic disciplines are accustomed to representing time and space, and not least, the relation between them

JORDHEIM, 2012:60 (author's translation)

Arguably, instead of choosing between the synchronic and diachronic concepts of time, it would be better to ask *how these temporalities interact* in a given case. How are the processes of becoming in the present connected to historically and biographically accumulated experience and expectations of the future? What happens if the synchronic situation is seen from a diachronic perspective, and in what ways may diachronic timelines be connected to the dynamics of synchronic situations?

Gender in change: Time as a methodological dimension

Qualitative longitudinal research and research on life history and generational transmission all highlight time as an important methodological, empirical, and analytical category, while at the same time immerse themselves in the detailed mapping of spaces where life is lived at different points of time. Since the time dimension in these cases also enters the research process itself, the context for the interpretation of any incident is extended as time passes for the interpreting researcher as well. My point is, of course, not that all social research should be longitudinal, although it would be an advantage to our understanding of many social issues if more was. Investigating the ways in which the synchronic research object can be embedded in diachronic timelines may indicate how time also enters the research process more generally. Thus, I suggest that an increased 'diachronic awareness' could form part of the assumptions made by researchers using synchronic data.

In the following sections, I will illustrate and discuss these points by drawing on my experiences in a longitudinal study of gender in change. To explore gender in change is indeed to enter a space where many heterogeneous timelines run beside each other, sometimes in and sometimes out of sync. Gender is central to divisions of labour and to the structuring of institutions. It is also a profound cultural system of meaning, norms, conventions, symbols, and myths; a dimension of bodies and physical reproduction, individual identities and personal experience, social relations and everyday interaction. The impact and meaning of gender are complex, contextual, and changing over time (McNay, 2004; Adkins, 2004; Aarseth, 2009). Processes of modernity affect all aspects of gendered life, but not necessarily at the same time, to the same degree, or in the same way. Women may become autonomous subjects with education and jobs and hold leading positions in society, but still be seen as objects or the ‘second sex’ (De Beauvoir, 1949). Similarly, both women and men may be engaged supporters of feminism, but also simultaneously feel attracted to some aspects of traditional gender positions.

In our longitudinal project, we studied gender in change over three generations of Norwegian women and men, born respectively around WW1, WW2, and in the early 1970s (Nielsen & Rudberg, 2006; Nielsen, 2017). The project examined how the processes of social mobility and cultural modernisation were related to the psychological project of becoming adults in these three generations. We sought to understand the interactions between cultural and personal gender in a process of change, to grasp the historical embeddedness not only of cultural norms but also of subjectivities, and, more specifically, how generational relationships contribute to these changes on the psychological level. The data comprised observation in five classes in two high schools with different social profiles in Oslo in 1990 and life history interviews with approximately half of the students in each class. The mothers and grandmothers of the female students and the fathers and the grandfathers of the male student were invited to similar interviews, and, in terms of generations, we ended up with 22 female chains and twelve male chains. The youngest generation, who was around 18–19 years old at the time of the first interview in 1991, were reinterviewed in 2001 and 2011 when they were approaching 30 and 40 years of age. Thus, the project operated methodologically with temporality in three different ways:

through life history interviews, through a generational sample, and through a longitudinal study lasting over 20 years of the youngest generation's life (for more details, see Nielsen, 2017).⁶

Time-bound research: Blind spots and reflections

I will start with some reflections on how time entered the research process itself. Longitudinal studies confront the researcher with diachronic time in many ways, and one of the more troublesome experiences is to realise how one's research questions may appear outdated a decade or two later: What made me ask these strange questions? Why did I have such an odd perspective? Thus, Horkheimer's claim about the *historical character of the perceiving organ* becomes difficult to ignore. There may, of course, be other aspects that are not felt to be outdated, or it may even be the case that some research questions have preserved fruitful perspectives that might have been forgotten because they do not fit with the present academic fashions (see also Hunt, 2008). The point is not that the researcher or the research community always become more enlightened as time passes, but rather that time inevitably makes its mark on the researcher's view and construction of the object in the present, and that this becomes particularly visible in research that spans longer stretches of time. Much methodological attention has been given to the situatedness of the researcher in terms of gender, age, class, ethnicity, etc., and in regard to their cultural assumptions and theoretical preconceptions. However, typically spatial metaphors are employed here, for instance, as in 'standpoint theory' (Harding, 1986) or the claim that it is neither possible to view the studied object from 'nowhere' nor from 'everywhere' (Haraway, 1988). What has had less focus is that the researcher is also positioned in time, and, as time is a more absolute dimension than space and conceptual framings (from which it is, at least in principle, possible to move to other places or new belongings), the position in time may be less accessible to self-reflexivity in the situation. This might be the reason for the numb feeling one can experience when being confronted with the time-boundedness in one's own longitudinal or generational research. However, it simply draws what is, in fact, the case for all research.

⁶ In the following empirical examples from the project, I will focus on some of the changing generational patterns. Of course, not all the interviewees within a generation fit equally well into these patterns; however, since the scope of the article is time as a theoretical and methodological dimension, the individual and cultural variation are not examined here, except for some indications of the significance of social class.

In the aforementioned three-generational project, this time-boundedness became particularly clear in some aspects of the sampling and interview guide. In the early 1990's Norwegian society, neither immigration nor sexual diversity received great focus, and without much consideration, we chose a sample consisting only of ethnically white Norwegians, and, as it turned out, only students who identified as heterosexual. Other kinds of variations were secured: social class, divorced/nondivorced parents, and the role the students took in class. In the hindsight of just 10 years, when ethnicity and sexual diversity had gained much greater attention, these choices became conspicuous in a way they were not back then. The exclusion of ethnic variety, however, also interacted with Horkheimer's first dimension, *the historical character of the object perceived*: due to the late immigration to Norway, the overwhelming majority of the students in Oslo high schools in 1991 were, in fact, white and ethnic Norwegian.⁷ The choice of not including the one or two minority students in each class was also more deliberate than the exclusion of sexual diversity. Since the focus was on modernisation processes in Norway over three generations, we decided that students whose parents and grandparents did not grow up in the Nordic countries were less relevant for the project. This may be seen as a reasonable argument, but it is also possible to argue that including them would have given us some interesting contrasts to work with. The consideration here is not what would have been the 'best' methodological solution, but to illustrate that had the decision been taken some years later, it might have been different; thus, time puts its mark on what is perceived as interesting and relevant methodological choices.

Sexual diversity garnered less reflection. We did not deliberately exclude queer students, rather, we simply did not reflect over the possibility that there were any. In the pre-queer times of the initial interviews, there was little attention to sexual diversity or fluidity; thus our own unquestioned position as heterosexual women interacted with the widespread cultural blindness of the era. Homosexuality was not illegal but seldom disclosed in classrooms, a scenario that had made it difficult to take into account. Even if we had considered this factor, announcing openly that we were seeking sexual diversity in our interview sample

⁷ Norway is a small country with a population that was ethnically rather homogeneous (apart from a small Sámi population in the north) until the late 20th century. This specific demographical history explains why there were very few immigrants and practically no non-white students in Norwegian schools at the time our study was conducted.

would probably have been seen at that time as an ethical violation, not only by research ethics committees, but also by schools, parents, teachers, and even the students themselves. Still, we might have found ways to circumnavigate this potentiality if we had been more aware of sexual diversity or the research team itself had been more sexually diverse. Again, the point here is not to raise a discussion about what is the right method of strategic sampling for different cases, but to illustrate the mutual dynamic between the changes in the object perceived and changes in the researcher's perception. In Hacking's words, 'What was known about people of a kind may become false because people of that kind have changed in virtue of what they believe about themselves' (1999: 34). By the follow-up interviews of 2001 and 2011, the situation had indeed changed: questions of migration, sexual orientation, racism, and heteronormativity were everywhere. The number of students from immigrant families had increased radically and there were more openly queer students. Thus, new questions were introduced in these interviews, where we also tried to 'catch up' with what our informants had thought about these issues 10 years earlier. When asked retrospectively about their knowledge and experiences with homosexuality as 18-year-olds, participants' answers illustrated that it was indeed not until the mid-1990s that gay and lesbian rights appeared on the mainstream public agenda. Several of them recounted a 10-year reunion for their high school year, where they learned that two girls from one of the classes were in a same-sex civil union, news that came as a complete surprise to everyone. A few had experienced a close friend coming out as gay or lesbian and remembered the awkwardness they had first felt. At 30, this timidity towards the issue had disappeared. Thus, the initial blindness of the researchers to sexual diversity also reflected a time when it was a little-acknowledged phenomenon. However, due to the time span of the research, we also learned that there had, of course, been students with a silent, non-normative sexuality in the classes we observed. How would it have affected our construction of the object of study if we had understood this in 1991?

Time-bound experiences: Age and generation

The possibility of filling blind spots retroactively also depends on time in another way, namely, the age phase and cohort of the informants. Whereas the interviewees of the youngest generation had been keen to talk about non-normative sexualities when they were around 30 years old—as they had fresh experiences of this from their own

and other's search for sexual identities as young adults—the issue sparked much less interest in the 2011 interviews when the interviewees were approaching 40, a point in time where they were enmeshed in and focused on their families and young children. This indicates that an interview guide may be constructed and trigger information differently, not only according to the moment in history but also in relation to the age phase and generation of the interviewees.

It was already quite clear in 1991 that parts of our interview guide functioned more effectively with the two youngest generations, who shared with us the psychological and individualist approach typical of the culture of late modernity. The oldest generation, especially those who had grown up in rural areas, attempted as best they could to answer our strange questions about adolescence or love: ‘I can't remember that we had like puberty and all that stuff. I can't say I had that’ (Rural woman, b. 1910). Many of the rural women also struggled to describe to us what had attracted them to their fiancés, whereas ready-made romantic stories poured out of their daughters and granddaughters when asked the same question. We also had to tread carefully with some of the more explicit sexual questions when talking to the oldest generation. These mismatches between the construction of the interview guide and the experiences of the interviewees resonate with Koselleck's theories of how concepts, words and the historical realities may become out of sync and operate as a historical dynamic towards change. The temporal displacements in our interviews went both ways: often our elder informants sensed that we, belonging to a younger generation, might misunderstand their words, for instance, in regard to the much stronger class divisions of their childhood worlds. An urban woman, born in 1911 into an upper-middle-class family, recalled her mother's charity work with pride, but realised midway that we would probably misunderstand what she was trying to tell us:

You should've seen the amazing Christmas care packages mother made for people in the hard 1930s when people were really struggling. Yes. And they weren't pauper's gifts either, far from it (...) Those who were a bit better off, or I don't know how to explain it so you don't get me wrong ... but they also had a huge sense of responsibility.

The time-bound experiences of the interviewees also raise the question of what, logically, can be compared between generations. Due to structural and demographical changes related to increased standards of living, increased levels of general education, and the increased prevalence of divorce, the same experiences in different generations of not receiving an education, being poor, or having divorced parents, attain very

different cultural and emotional meanings. Thus, instead of comparing the same items, such as the level of wealth or the number of divorces in the childhoods of different generations, it may sometimes be more apt to compare items that represent the same kind of existential insecurity, for instance, the experience of poverty in the oldest generation and the experience of divorce in the youngest. As the oldest generation knew that poverty and the death of parents were calculated risks in life, so was the possibility of parental divorce for their grandchildren. The increased consciousness of the fragility of human relations became the backdrop of life for the youngest generation, and they learned how to handle it much in the same way as their grandparents learned to handle the material hardships of their own childhoods. The construction of the object through the intricate interaction between the time-bound research questions, time-bound experiences, and perspectives of the interviewees, both in regard to generation and age phase, is not just a methodological issue to be resolved but represents part of the conditions for undertaking research on the ‘interactive kind’ of phenomena (cf. Hacking, 1999). For a synchronic study, the aspect to concentrate on is that the time-bound horizon from which we ask and from which the informants' answer may both reflect dimensions of the object itself and the researcher's own construction of the object.

Pockets of the past in the present

The temporal displacements between concepts, words and realities mentioned in the previous section may also be seen as an expression of the multi-layeredness of time, or, as Koselleck coined it, ‘the simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous’ (cited in Jordheim, 2012b: 162). Memories are always reconstructions in the present of what happened in the past and narratives are, therefore, characterised by selections, linking of memories, interpretations, and chosen perspectives (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Bruner, 2003; Rosenthal, 2004). Evidently, the stories of the informants’ childhood, youth, and family life are seen through discourses or ‘lenses’ that belong to different historical moments, some of them dated more recently than the time they were recounting. For the eldest generation, such recent lenses providing narrative perspectives included, in particular, the increased standards of living, possibilities for education, and changed norms of morality. The men tended to particularly emphasise the moral decay in society, whereas the women were more occupied with the increased openness surrounding sex and bodily functions and the diminished social

differences among people. Hardly any of the lenses of the older generation were present in the stories of the middle generation. Instead, their more recent narrative perspectives included increased enlightenment and the norm of gender equality. Coincidentally, however, we also found older layers of meaning in the way the interviewees talked. Across generations, there were different ‘genres’ at work in the ways the informants discussed the world and themselves. The oldest generation tended to construct their stories in a rather deterministic ‘structuralist’ way, often saying, *‘That was the way it was back then’*. Many of them were good storytellers. They offered broad and generalised pictures of their family life, their activities, and the community they grew up in, but also included many vivid details that almost evoke a feeling of standing in front of a naturalist landscape painting:

I must say that I grew up in a good home. I must say I did. And father was a carpenter, so we always had skis and ski sticks. I had an awfully long way to school, so in winter we went on our skis if the snow was good. And we had sleighs, too. We lived close to the railway station, so when we went to school, we had to go all the way down into the valley, and across the river—I think we had a 6 km-long walk to school. (Woman, b.1910 into the rural lower-middleclass)

The outer things are made central here: what one did, what happened, what one had, what one ate, often illustrated through concrete episodes and events. Much more frequently than the following generations, the older interviewees talked in terms of a collective ‘we’. This descriptive and non-individualist perspective was also seen in their evaluations, where nuances and reservations were seldom conveyed: things were either good or bad, and criticism of parents and homes was rare.

This deterministic sociological genre was not present in the talk of the middle generation. Their self-presentations drew on a more psychological genre, always problematising their own motives, seeking the answers in childhood experiences, as well as reflecting upon their own reconstruction of memories:

When I think back on my childhood, and as a young adult, I must say I think it was unusually good and, well, fortunate. And I know that it is like you often forget things, and you repress bad memories because nobody is totally happy. I know that. But, really, I found this diary, from when I was 17 years of age, and it reads there, ‘I am so happy, everything is so good’. So, I did write that there. (Woman, b. in 1944 into an urban middle-class family).

This generation provided lengthy descriptions of family relations and dynamics and was much less focused on material life conditions or the community they grew up in.

Recollections of activities and events often slid into interpretations and evaluations of those activities and events. Psychological concepts had become everyday ideas and were used to interpret their lives and feelings (cf. Giddens, 1990), which also seems to imply the removal of a taboo against talking negatively about others—such statements can now be understood within a legitimate field of analytic and interpretative activity, not as finite assertions about how somebody ‘really’ is.

The youngest generation still made use of this psychological discourse, but it was often simultaneously ironically negated, especially in the first interview at the age of 18. The ‘who-am-I?’ orientation seemed to permeate everything they said, and instead of a ‘story’ of their upbringing, they gave us bits and pieces, held together more by the underlying emotional tone than by the actual information or a storyline. It could sometimes be difficult to grasp whether they were trying to convey problems or simply put themselves and their family on the stage:

Well, mostly we eat at home, but not dinners really. We just have a sandwich system. We make dinners when we feel like it and have sandwiches when we don’t feel like it. My mom got quite frustrated. Like every time she had made something, I said ‘Ugh, are we having that for dinner?!’ [laughs] ‘Ugh, I don’t want that. Phew!’, if it looked kind of boring. (Urban middle-class girl, b. 1971)

One might say that their perspective on the world related more to the academic genre of ‘cultural studies’ than to the ‘sociology’ of their grandmothers or the ‘psychology’ of their mothers.

Viewed strictly as historical sources, all the interviews are synchronic remnants from 1991; thus, the ‘time of the action and events’ is the interview situation. The generation-specific genres may stem from both the age phase of the informants and the relationship in the interview situation to us as interviewers belonging to the middle generation. However, the different perspectives and narrative genres may also tell us something about historical shifts and how people come to understand themselves in changing historical contexts. The fact that people from the same generation so clearly tend to pick similar discourses when constructing their memoirs of childhood and youth also makes it feasible to view these discourses as *small pockets of history*, preserved in the individuals, or, to use Koselleck’s words, ‘a diachronic movement through the synchronic moment’ (Jordheim, 2012a: 166). The gradual rise of modern reflexivity, for instance, is evident in the narratives across the three generations interviewed in the same synchronic moment. The different genres

may also be described as Bakhtinian chronotypes representing the relationship between a specific textual structure and an actual reality (Bakhtin, 1984: 243). The oldest generation's focus on the outer world may be understood in relation to the scarcity in their childhood; the relational interest in the middle generation may be interpreted as a result of new possibilities of leisure and self-realisation; and finally, the observational, ironic style of the youngest generation would be hard to imagine without their extensive access to the media, just as their fragmented stories might be an expression of the actual relational havoc surrounding them. The stories of each generation, featuring many of the same concrete recollections, indicate that there are indeed experiences to be interpreted, not only inventions of the present. Subjects contain different layers of chronological time, which will be integrated in their selfpresentation of the present.

Seeds of futures in the present

It is not only the past that represents an integral part of the present: the same goes for the future. In his work on the psychology of imagination, Sartre introduced a distinction between lived and imagined futures. The former are possibilities for a future that is already present: what we expect will happen, given what we already know. The latter is an imagining of what could come into existence, even though it is not part of our actual experience. The two are related, as the imagination of what is not yet is not arbitrary but always a negation of the world from a particular point of view (Sartre 1972, 215).

The presence of lived and imagined futures was evident in the threegenerational project when we asked our informants about the dreams they had in life when they were young. The dreams of the oldest generation both presupposed and exceeded their specific situations as young women: a rural girl dreamt of getting a job as a shop assistant, whereas a small-town girl who actually was a shop assistant dreamt of moving to the city or opening her own shop, and some of the city girls dreamt about travelling to some other place to obtain a certain education. Dreams of the impossible need not be formulated too precisely, and they are not so difficult to give up, either. Therefore, poor rural girls dreaming of becoming shop assistants, nurses, or even travelling the world may also say that they did not pursue these dreams very energetically and that they soon adapted to what was possible and just hoped to get married. For the urban middle-class girls, it appears to have been a much

more dramatic sense of loss when external conditions suddenly crushed an anticipated educational plan. In the middle generation, where the possibilities for jobs and education actually exceeded what they could imagine, the dreams rather negated the lack of freedom at home: their dreams of the future were to get away from home and start their own family. In the youngest generation, the idea that ‘one can become anything one wants’ could be said to negate the split in late-modern society between the horizon of expectation and actual possibilities (cf. Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2002). Seeds of the future may also be present in a situation (as a lived future) but only realised later, or maybe not first accomplished until the next generations. An example from our study is the young women's reframing of gender, body, and sexuality in the public sphere. Seen from a generational perspective, this may be understood as part of a larger historical process of individualisation that gradually detached gender from subjectivities. The shift in normative ideals for young girls in these three generations can be described as a move from the ‘nice girl’ of the interwar period, to the ‘popular girl’ of the after-war period, and the ‘autonomous girl’ by the end of the century (Nielsen, 2004; Nielsen and Rudberg, 2007). By identifying themselves as nice girls, only out to have some fun, the young women of the 1920s and 1930s could defend their right to be in a public space without damaging their reputation (Søland, 2000). The ‘nice girl’ lost ground during the Second World War: the sight of unaccompanied young girls in public spaces did not shock or provoke anymore; thus, young women had now gained more freedom and did not have to legitimise their presence by being ‘nice’. However, the new freedom and individuality of the 1950s and 1960s also implied a new form of exposure for young women, where they were evaluated by other young people on the basis of their looks and popularity (Breines, 1992). The ‘nice girl’ had by now become rather a ‘boring girl’, whereas the ‘cheap girl’ was still around. However, this absence of a clear line between ‘nice’ and ‘cheap’ girls also meant that sexual morality was on its way to becoming a personal matter and responsibility, not just something to adapt to. Thus, freedom in the public space, carved out by the inter-war generation under the flag of being nice girls, was further elaborated by the post-war generation in a curious blend of increased individualised morality and responsibility on the one side, and a strengthening of the heterosexual script on the other. Towards the end of the century, the contour of the ‘cheap’ girl was becoming blurred. Young women in the 1980s and 1990s were allowed to experience both desire and ambition as gender-syntonic, and it was now

rather the fear of not being self-reliant and independent that tormented them. The popular and boy-crazy girl lingered on the edge of conformity; the danger was no longer that of being 'a fallen women', but rather of being 'a fallen subject' (Nielsen and Rudberg, 2007).

In this analysis, the behaviour of one generation becomes the stepping-stone for the next. What appears incredibly conformist when seen isolated in each generation, may, in fact, be steps in a longer process of change when seen diachronically and over generations. Like Sartre, one may say that each generation has acted on the basis of their own lived future, but, through their imagined future, they have also contributed to extending the lived future for the next generation. One needs generational data to see such processes; however, it is important to also be aware of this ambiguity when analysing synchronic data since there may be layers of meaning that cannot be fully deciphered in the present moment. Things can form part of bigger movements, and, therefore, the space for interpretation must be kept open.

The past meets the present and creates the future

My final example of how following subjects over time may render visible their contributions to new social forms is taken from the historical peak of housewives in Norway in the 1950s. In feminist analyses, the housewife era has been understood primarily as a result of the improving living standards and after-war family politics in combination with the power imbalance between men and women (Hartman, 1981; Oakley, 1990). However, adding a diachronic perspective through biographical data allows for a wider interpretation than in studies that have had only a synchronic focus. The below example indicates how a specific gendered biographical experience may be formulated into a new life project when it meets a new historical situation. The oldest generation, in particular, those who grew up in rural areas, described a strict gendered division of work with women inside and men outside. However, in the struggle to make ends meet, the women would often have to assist the men outdoors. In the interviews, the men of the elder generation remembered how hard their kind and mild mothers had to work. In contrast, the women described their mothers as strong and strict figures and their fathers as more playful and fun. As young couples and parents in the years after the Second World War, this generation chose to organise their lives through a gendered division of work into providers and housewives. This may be seen as a life project, especially for the men from rural poor or backgrounds,

the social group who were the backbone of the migration to cities after WW2. They wanted their wives stay at home to spare them the hard toil that their mothers had to endure and to secure the best possible childhood for their children. They described it as a deliberate choice and discussed it with pride, expressing gratitude to and admiration for their wives' contributions to the household, including their proficiency as child carers and raisers. One of them, Einar, who had a small shoe repair shop in Oslo in the 1950s, said:

We had three children and it went really well, she was very capable. She was a very clever girl, very responsible and such a wonderful mother. I never had to think about the kids. I could work and so on. Never needed to worry... Could trust her one hundred per cent. She took care of the kids... food and shelter and always well kept. And she didn't have a job outside the house. I wanted her to be home with the kids.

However, Einar also had to work hard to make ends meet. He worked long hours in his shop to provide for his family, which was not easy since he was suffering from severe health issues following his war injuries:

I managed. Had to go to work. I had brought children into the world and had a responsibility, a huge responsibility. And you can't give up. You just have to keep going. Even if it hurts a bit sometimes.

From the perspective of the men in this generation, providing for their families and letting their wives stay home was a gift of love and a way to prove oneself as a 'grown-up' and responsible man. The price they paid, though, emerges in the striking contrast between the proud descriptions of their accomplishments at work and their replies when questioned what had been the most important things in their lives. Asked what had made him most happy in life, Einar said, 'It must have been when I became a father, I have to say. That has been my everything'. We may understand this as a life project in a specific historical moment where these men's biographically formed subjectivity, including a specific way to feel about gender, matched the new demands of the labour market, the rise in living standards, family policies of the post-war welfare state, and the possibility for most families to survive on one income. Hence, subjective and structural changes reinforced each other to create a social change in gender relations.

Compared to the idealisation of female care and the gratitude towards their wives expressed by the men, the silence on these matters from the women we interviewed is more than striking. Some of them rather questioned the strict rural

work division of their childhood and vocalised their feeling that work could have been more of a joint venture between husband and wife. Refining gender complementarity is not an obvious solution here, and, thus, tensions and unrest are built into the new life project of this generation from the very beginning. A blind spot in the new gender arrangement is the implication of the move from a rural to an urban context, which was crucial in this generation. The idea of refining gender complementarity had, for many of the men, been conceived of in a rural context where women's work did not confine them to the house but functioned less well when put into practice within an urban setting, where housewives were expected to do their work within the home. If the refined gender complementarity was given as a gift of love from the men in this generation, it does not appear to have been received in that way (Nielsen, 2017). A synchronic reading of the power imbalance in this situation is not wrong, but it does not grasp the whole picture, particularly how the different biographical pasts of men and women were a condition for their life projects, which was part of the realisation of the new social order. However, the times were definitely on the men's side in a period where it was both ideologically and economically arranged for married women to stay at home.

Time and theoretical integration

I have presented a number of arguments in this article: that time is always coconstructing the objects of study, often in ways that is difficult to access in the moment; that time has an influence on what informants of different ages and generations may be able to express about their situation; that social phenomena may be understood better if synchronic and diachronic perspectives are integrated; that time has a multi-layered character, both in the sense that the past may exist as small pockets, and futures as seeds in the present; and finally, that following subjects over time may render visible their life projects and, thus, contribute to a more adequate understanding of new social forms. In doing this, I have also explored what Horkheimer's claim about the historical character of both the object perceived and the perceiving organ may imply in the research process.

To conclude, I will discuss two ways that understanding the research object in time and space could also contribute to the clarification of theoretical issues. The first is that it may help soften some of the many prevailing theoretical dualisms, such as agency and structure, the psychological and the social, and essentialism and

constructivism (see also Giddens, 1984; Luhmann, 1995; Falmagne, 2009 on this point). Following subjects over time or from different generations indicates, for instance, the untenability of the poststructuralist dualism between continuously processual becoming, on the one side, and what is seen as a static and inherently essentialist humanistic subject tied up in discourses of progress, rationality, and normalisation, on the other. Including a time dimension that is connected to biographical experience and to lived and imagined futures demonstrates it is not necessary to choose between either studying people's identities as unitary, coherent, and universal, *or* studying how their identities are constantly changing or linguistically constituted in the processes of the present. Experiences of interaction are sedimented over time such that it means that the way a person 'does' gender also becomes an expression of who the person has become through these actions, and, thus, in that sense 'is'. Further, the dualism between essentialism and nominalism, which makes it tricky to understand the co-existence of change and continuity in people's lives, may be lessened by the perspective of the multi-layeredness of time in the subject as it allows for the coexistence of change and continuity in actions, as well as in their outcomes. Thus, subjects come into being by sedimentations of events and experiences over time, brought about by action.

A second way in which understanding subjects in time and space may help to resolve theoretical disagreements is that it can also locate theories in time. If the objects of inquiry change historically, so must the theories about them. Different theoretical perspectives are often discussed as different conceptual accounts in timeless contexts or as a product of newer and more advanced thinking. What happens if they are also seen in relation to the changing object? Could a diachronic perspective on the research object contribute to dissecting when theoretical disagreements are primarily products of different epistemological assumptions and conceptual arguments and when they also reflect changes in the object that call for the formulation of new theoretical perspectives?

The three-generational project indicates that this may be the case. The project considered different psychoanalytic perspectives to understand gender and subjectivity that had emerged as theoretical alternatives in academic debates. The different theories were formulated at different historical points, and the most recent of them was clearly best attuned to modern gender theory. However, the theories may also be seen and used as historical formations, not only in the sense that they reveal

the cultural, normative, and theoretical assumptions of their time but as sources of information about empirical patterns that later disappeared or became less poignant. This turned out to be the case when we compared the changing patterns of gender and subjectivity in the three generations of women and men with the different theories: the oldest generation seemed to be best explained by the Freudian Oedipal model (Freud, 1925), with its emphasis on psychological gender complementarity in the patriarchal family and the importance of the split between feelings of identification and feelings of desire. The middle generation had a better match with the gender identity model, where processes of individuation-separation, in connection with asymmetric parenting, lead to gender differences in the development of intimacy and autonomy (Chodorow, 1978). The youngest generation fit best into the gender ambiguity model, which questions the idea of two traces of development and views difference and sameness as a continuous tension in the psychic life of gender as well as in the modern family (Benjamin, 1995). These three psychological gender theories were formulated during or in the aftermath of the childhoods of the three generations, and even if the fits are not seamless, the relatively better match between the model and the childhood from the same period is notable.

This indicates that it is not only the theories that have changed as a result of critical work but also the gendered psychologies they set out to describe, suggesting that the different psychological constellations and tensions described in these models have had different impacts in different historical contexts. It also implies that the reason the theories developed as they did was that they caught the contours of a changed generational pattern in the times in which they were formulated: new structures of feelings related to gender. Maybe gender identities were, in fact, more binary and less fluid half a century ago? In that case, the concept of stable identities is not necessarily theoretically wrong, but such identities appear to have become less frequent. In raising these questions, I am neither positing that we should assume all theories will always be empirically true during the period in which they were conceived, nor that theoretical and normative critique is redundant or worthless, nor even that researchers simply directly reflect the times in which they live. Rather, I am arguing that it may be useful to also include more awareness of time in theoretical debates: as researchers, we must take into account that neither in methodology nor in theoretical work is it possible to move out of time.

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