

Paper presented to

Australian Social Policy Conference: *Social Policy in a Complex World*  
University of New South Wales, Sydney 6–8 July 2011

## **Can life stories inform policy in a complex world?**

Janet Taylor  
Brotherhood of St Laurence

### **Abstract**

Australian longitudinal research with a social policy focus has often been quantitative rather than qualitative. The longitudinal Life Chances Study offers the opportunity to explore young people's real life stories from infancy to age 18, both from the perspectives of their parents and, as they grow up, in their own words. The stories can illustrate important processes, ranging from financial disadvantage to parenting styles to career choices.

The Life Chances Study has followed the lives some 140 children who were born in the same inner Melbourne suburb in 1990. The families are from diverse income levels and ethnic groups. The study has a particular interest in the reduction of child poverty and social exclusion.

The paper presents one family's story to explore issues of policy as the study child grows up through the 1990s and early 2000s. It asks what life stories can tell us about the accumulation of advantage and disadvantage for young people growing up in Australia today and about the effectiveness of our social support system in assisting families as they raise their children. These are considered in the context of changes in Australian society over the last 20 years

# Can life stories inform policy in a complex world?

## The question

For this presentation, I'm asking the question: Can life stories inform policy in a complex world? The life stories being considered today are those from longitudinal research – in particular from qualitative longitudinal research.

In Australia longitudinal research with a social policy focus has generally been quantitative (focusing on statistics) rather than qualitative and this is very important in its own right. However the Brotherhood's longitudinal Life Chances Study offers the opportunity to explore young people's real life stories from infancy to age 18, both from the perspectives of their parents and, as they grow up, in their own words.

In the UK Rachel Thompson (associated with the Timescapes projects) links the growing interest in qualitative longitudinal research as associated with an interest in processes (rather than simply outcomes) and with a focus on the individual. She writes:

*Given that social policies increasingly seek to influence behaviour, the 'long view' offered by qualitative longitudinal research offers the possibility of developing more complex, and thus more realistic understandings of how and why individuals and communities live as they do and the intended and unintended consequences of policies themselves. (Thompson 2007, p.572)*

This presentation outlines the Life Chances Study; presents one family's story to explore issues related to policy as the study child grows up through the 1990s and the early 21st century; and looks at the effectiveness of our social support system in assisting families as they raise their children. These are considered in the context of changes in Australian society over the last 20 years.

## The Life Chances Study

The Life Chances Study started with interviews with the mothers of 167 babies born in 1990 in two inner Melbourne suburbs. The families were very diverse, reflecting their local area – with both high and low-income families, parents with a range of educational qualifications, and diverse ethnic backgrounds including recent refugees. The data has been collected so far over 9 stages, with reports written at each stage (see [www.bsl.org.au](http://www.bsl.org.au)). We are now planning stage 10 when the children will be aged 21.

The data collection has involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. Interviews were the main source of data: at some stages face to face interviews and at some stages phone interviews. Selected interviews have been audio recorded and transcribed. The study started with interviews with the mothers, but at later stages both parents were interviewed, and, from age 11, also the children themselves. There have also been some learning assessment activities and teacher reports collected. The use of bilingual interviewers has been important with non-English speaking families.

At present I'm working on a possible book exploring the individual life stories of six or eight families over the first 18 years of the study. The 'stories' are based on what the young people and their parents have told us over the years. In one sense they are very much their own stories, in their own words where possible. In another sense they are stories that have been created by the research, shaped to varying extents by the questions we asked, although there were many opportunities for the participants to make their own comments.

We look here at one story – that of a young woman I will call Amy and her parents, Mr and Mrs A. At this stage her story runs to some 15,000 words. So here I present only glimpses of her story and a few of the policy issues it raises.

## **Amy's story**

In brief, Amy grew up in a low-income Cantonese-speaking family, first with two parents and then, with just her mother, living in public housing on a sole parent payment.

The story started with Mrs A as an unhappy, lonely mother isolated by lack of English. When Mrs A was first interviewed she was living in a high-rise flat in inner Melbourne with her husband and her first child, 6-month-old baby Amy. She was interviewed in Cantonese by a bilingual interviewer. She had been born in China and had arrived in Australia three years before. She married a year after coming to Australia. Her husband was born in Vietnam. He was working as a labourer at a car factory. Before Amy's birth Mrs A had been working full-time as a machinist in a clothing factory. For Amy's future Mrs A said: *I will teach her to have a good character and to contribute to society when she grows up.* She wanted Amy to attend university. However they were struggling financially since she had stopped work and she worried they would not have enough money to bring Amy up and give her the things she needed.

When Amy was aged 3 the family had moved to a house they were buying in an outer suburb. However Mr A had been unemployed for 18 months since the car factory where he worked laid people off during the 1991–92 recession. Mrs A said: *There were times when money was so tight I could only spend \$2 on a meal. I used to buy Amy bread and spent only 20 cents on a bread roll for myself.* Mrs A reported having serious arguments with her husband and wept as she explained: *My husband is unemployed. He likes to smoke and drink. A mortgage needs to be paid. I want him to save some money. He spent \$50 a week on smokes and drinks. All this distresses me a lot. When I persuaded him not to spend so much he hit me. I left home once and returned because I could not leave Amy. He hit me several times, sometimes after drinking.* Meanwhile, for her future, Mrs A took Amy to a playgroup and the local library hoping to prepare her for school.

When Amy was aged 6 Mrs A had separated from her husband, had moved several times including to a women's refuge, and was now living as a sole parent with her two children in a high rise flat in another inner suburb. It had been a very unsettled time for the children. Amy, aged 6, had health issues with eczema causing sleeping problems: *Medication is very expensive. I cannot buy expensive medication for her skin rashes.* Amy was now in Grade 1. With the moves, Amy had a number of changes of school. Mrs A commented: *She lost interest in studies. The teachers did not seem to pay her much attention.*

Mrs A and her two children were still living in the inner Melbourne high-rise estate five years later. She and her husband had divorced. Life had stabilised somewhat. Amy, aged almost 12, had started Year 7 at a government girls' high school. Mrs A was concerned about Amy's progress at school: *She has been weak at English. Last year the school organised an integration aide to assist her for half a year. An assessment by her teacher showed she did not have a learning problem. She is rather slow and lacks confidence.* School costs had increased considerably for Amy in Year 7 – over \$2000 for the year. *Uniform and text books are too expensive to afford. I only buy what is really necessary. I try to buy second-hand books. However, Amy doesn't like second-hand books. We may have not enough money for the future because Amy will need a computer and English tutoring soon.*

Amy would have liked a computer but knew this cost too much. Amy explained: *Sometimes I feel jealous because some other people might have a computer and they're on the internet and they get a better result for their project because they've got more*

*information.* Amy explained what she liked best about her home, the flat in a high rise estate: *It makes me feel safe and I have lots of fun with my mum.* However she added: *Sometimes I feel scared that someone might come and try to kill us or rob us.*

Amy also raised the issue of racism. When asked whether everyone in Australia had an equal chance of a good life, she replied: *Not exactly because some people might think that Asian people, that they're not really good because they weren't born here or they had different colour skin – like racists.*

Financial constraints meant Amy missed out on many things as she was growing up; however she received strong encouragement from her mother about the importance of education and good support from the school. She finished Year 12 (with a tertiary entrance score in the 70s) and, aged 18, was enjoying studying primary teaching at university. She had particularly enjoyed her teaching placement working with Preps: *It's been really good. I'm really glad that I enrolled into this course about teaching. I think it's a really rewarding job to have.*

It seems that Amy's own resilience with her mother's encouragement and support from the wider social system enabled the positive outcome, at age 18, of a happy friendly young teacher in training.

## **The stories within the story**

One way of considering Amy's story is as one of considerable early disadvantage and disruption which stabilised to allow her, at 18, a quite positive outcome. However, there are many stories and themes that arise from the interviews with the A family. I will explore only a few of these.

### **The new immigrant experience**

Mrs A's account of her life as a recent migrant with little English highlights some of the difficulties experienced by many other new settlers. She attended English classes for 6 months but had not learned enough English in that time to communicate confidently. She had worked full-time in a factory with little opportunity to improve her English. After her baby was born she was isolated at home, not able to understand letters that arrived, contact Centrelink or even be able to call for help if needed. However there were helpful local services: she had received assistance from the local bilingual community health worker and attended the Chinese women's group the worker ran, and her doctor spoke Cantonese.

Location and the point in time were both factors in the availability of the services. The assistance and language services that were available in the inner suburb were not as available in the outer suburb to which the family moved. Meanwhile some of the services which had been available in the inner city in 1990 were later reduced. For example inner suburban community health centres suffered funding cuts in 1994 and their ethnic workers and women's groups were reduced. There were also new restrictions such as cost recovery for interpreting and limits on hours for English classes.

From a policy perspective Mrs A's story highlights the continuing needs for immigrant women with limited English for services such as: English classes, with child care, bilingual community workers, and readily available interpreting assistance in health services and schools.

### **The impact of the father's unemployment on the family**

Large scale studies often link unemployment with assorted family stresses but do not show the processes linking these variables. For Mrs A, her husband's unemployment

led to a disastrous chain of events. She described Mr A's unemployment and inability to find another job as leading to him having too much time on his hands, this leading to his drinking and gambling which in turn led to disputes between them about his spending their limited money (Newstart Allowance). These disputes became violent. In due course Mrs A, with the children, left the marriage.

To reflect on the wider context of Mr A's employment: Mr A lost his job in a car factory in the recession of the early 1990s as did many other migrant and refugee workers with limited other employment options. Following the recession, the continuing loss of manufacturing jobs in Victoria meant long-term unemployment for many of these. Both Mr and Mrs A had worked full-time in factories in 1990 and both became long-term unemployed. The clothing factory in which Mrs A had worked closed, and could well have moved production to China, but that is another story.

### **The social support system**

The context of support from social and community services provides an important aspect of Amy's story. Mrs A and Amy had access to a range of community services, ranging from health services to local libraries. However language, cost and location were barriers to access to some services.

They received important support to deal with their hardship from three major government programs: income support, public housing and public education. The combination of income support and public housing provided Amy with a stable if constrained environment over most of her schooling. Income support payments (Social Security renamed Centrelink) provided a steady but very low income for the family while the father was unemployed and then as a sole parent family. Over the years, Mrs A found this either 'just enough' or 'not quite' enough to get by on. Public housing provided relatively affordable, stable accommodation close to services and transport but with drawbacks as Amy's ambivalence illustrated.

For education, the A's were fortunate to live near a government high school with a good academic record. Zoning of most high schools in inner Melbourne makes the family's home address an important factor in the availability of education. The school was able to provide Amy with what she needed to move on to tertiary education. However the costs of even this 'free' education were a burden for Mrs A.

The education policy issues raised by Amy's story include: managing school costs, support within schools for children changing schools, school integration assistance, and well resourced career counselling and work experience placements.

### **The context of change – 1990–2010**

The recession of the early 1990s has already been mentioned, and along with the continuing decline in manufacturing employment.

Housing affordability has declined over the 20 years, with home purchase beyond the reach of many families, private rental insecure and costly and public housing stock declining.

The 20 years witnessed an increase in social policy in a neoliberal framework with an emphasis on privatisation and on individual rather than social responsibility. In the area of income support what had been known as 'receiving social security payments' became labelled negatively as 'welfare dependency'. At the same time there was a growth of income inequality and of the gap between rich and poor. The adequacy of income support payments for families remains a key policy issue.

These 20 years saw an increased expectation that young people complete Year 12. At the same time there was increased government funding for private as opposed to public education and increased costs at the nominally 'free' public schools. The policy of 'choice' in education did not extend to low-income families.

Technological changes included the introduction and then the spread in the 1990s of home computers and the internet and then of mobile phones. The new technologies have changed the daily lives of the young people growing up and also created a new divide between 'haves' and 'have nots'.

## Implications

The answer to the initial question – yes, life stories can inform policy in a complex world. They can assist in

- understanding processes – for example how unemployment can lead to family breakdown
- assessing policies – for example the adequacy of income support payments and the provision of public housing.

In a complex world, we need a variety of stories to show how policies work, or don't work, for different people. We need to acknowledge generational differences, but also to see beyond stereotypes such as Generation Y. Life stories seen in an historical context can highlight the changes in policy over time, for better and worse.

But policy makers need statistics too, to answer questions of how many people, how many services, and where are the services needed? Current qualitative data is also needed to show how current policies are affecting people now.

To conclude with two messages from the study:

- We need to ensure policies and services provide the best opportunities for *all* children growing up in Australia.
- We need to listen carefully to individual stories to ensure this happens.

### Note:

For further information about the Life Chances Study and its reports, see the Brotherhood of St Laurence website <http://www.bsl.org.au/>.

Contact [jtaylor@bsl.org.au](mailto:jtaylor@bsl.org.au)

### Reference:

Thomson, R 2007, The qualitative longitudinal case history: practical, methodological and ethical reflections, *Social Policy & Society*, vol. 6, no. 4 pp 571–583.