



On Time

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Thinking through time and temporality: some research examples

ESRC Research Methods Programme: methods for accessing socially excluded people – Nick Emmel and Joanne Greenhalgh

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1467-9566.2007.01018.x>

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.5153/sro.1512>

ESRC Intergenerational Exchange: Low-income grandparents and health <https://timescapes-archive.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/47/2020/07/timescapes-emmel-analysing-time.pdf>

A question of time:

'...the word "time" is a symbol of a relationship that a human group of beings biologically endowed with the capacity for memory and synthesis, establishes between two or more continua of changes, one which is used by it as a frame of reference or standard of measurement for the other or others.'
(Norbert Elias, 1992:46)

Or to put it another way:

It's a form of constant comparison, where there are multiple *forms* of continua

These are reflected in many different sorts of time, e.g.,:

- Geological
- Seasonal
- Lifespan
- Clock time



Temporality?

- Temporality is very much of experience, pace, tempo, timing, speed, slowness, drag – these are human expressions
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These are all expressions of relationships

- Where these relationships may be geological, *or* interpersonal
- Therefore, not just local – but global and historical

(e.g., enables us to think through the development of the discipline of sociology – how do things come to be)



So what?

- Therefore, time not just a social construct, it's a mean of orientation towards particular ways of thinking through past, present and future, over different timescapes
- Different temporalities don't come from nowhere, they are expressive of particular sets of social conditions and also different degrees of social integration and social complexity
- Over the long duree, growing levels of structural complexity (not linear), and lengthening chains of interdependency as Elias talks about it, and that places demands on us as an intensification to orientate towards others and events, down to the micro-second

So what else?

- Places demands on how we are increasingly compelled to restrain impulses, detach ourselves from the moment, and go on this 'detour via detachment', and orientate ourselves towards the future – an imagined future where we're doing x or y
- This has parallels with Foucault, and the birth of the modern self – where we come to think of ourselves as a self, objects of our own reflection

Often people
talk about
doing research
through the
'lens' of time

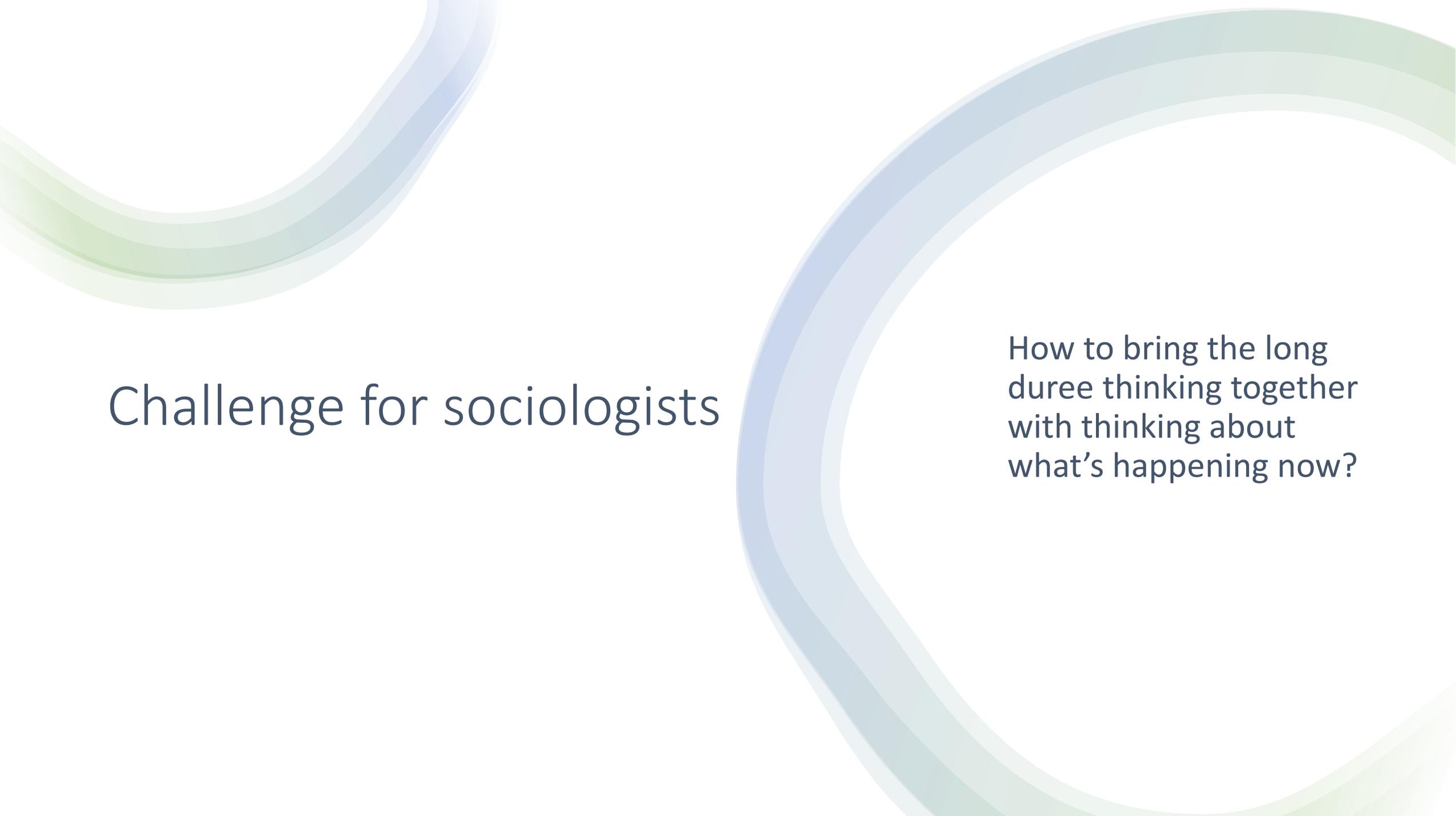
- Use of temporal concepts – generation, history, biography, futures
- But I think it's incredibly important always to understand that we are always productively engaged in and through time – that we might separate out time and temporality for didactic purposes but that, if we return to Elias's notion of time, that these temporal experiences, concepts and so forth are forms of human engagement with itme

Olduvai
Hand axe:
detour via
detachment



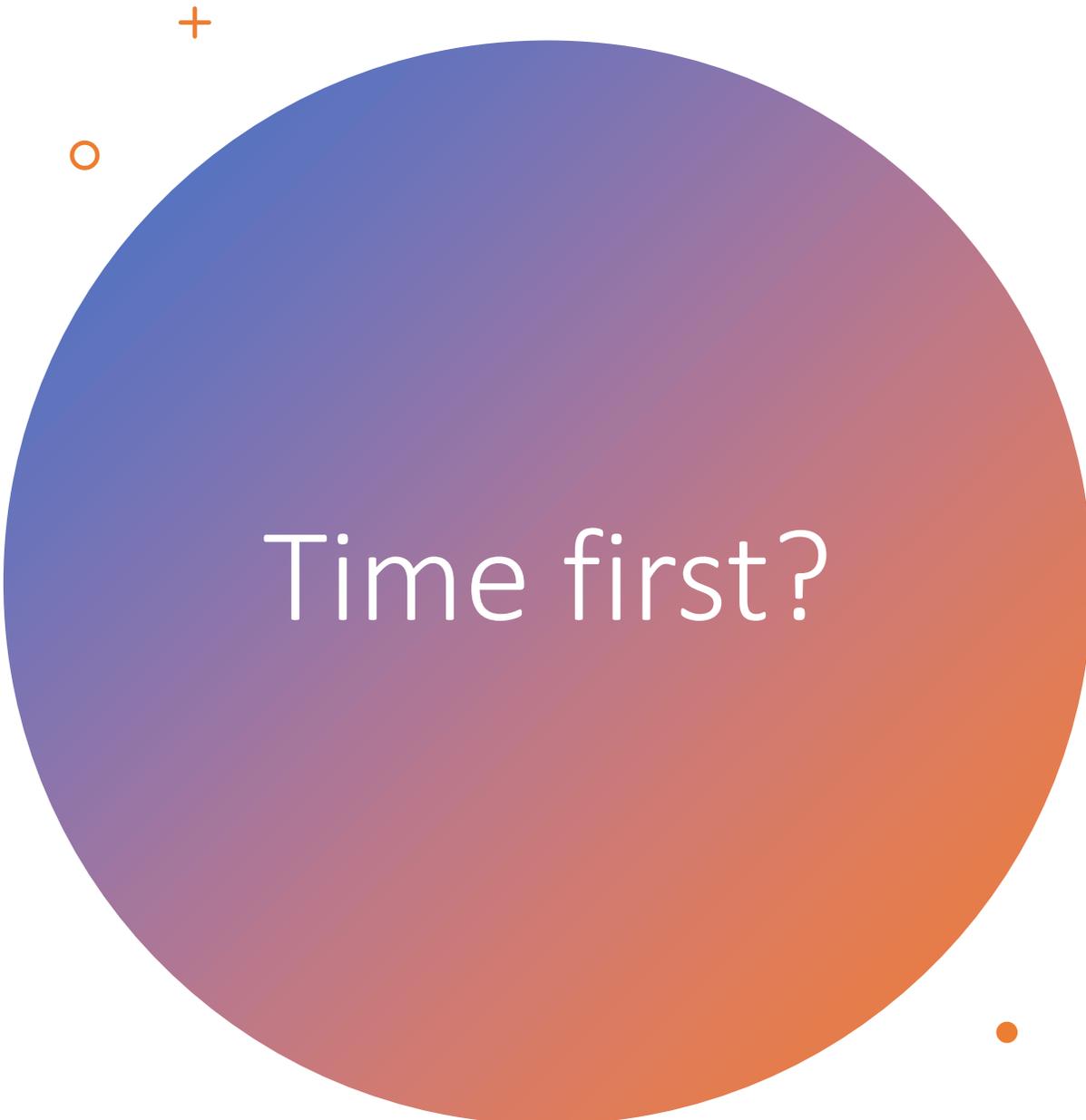
Detour via detachment

- What makes us human is that we are temporal creatures



Challenge for sociologists

How to bring the long
duree thinking together
with thinking about
what's happening now?



Time first?

- To have time presupposes particular social material conditions
 - What is an empirically significant time frame within this given set of social conditions for this particular group of people
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To return to the low-income grandparents

- Part of that retreat to the present, retreat to the moment is because we can't have power or authority and control over the myriad of relationships that situate us in time and place – not only local but global
- People lack capacity to exercise constraint on other, or to manipulate the conditions whereby a relationship exists, to coordinate relationships – other people set the conditions, and they have to meet them.
- So the capacity to hold or mobilise resources, are words to describe power chances
- If you engage temporally you can see the micro dynamics of inequality as it plays out over time
- The language of temporality facilitates a more nuanced engagement with questions of lived inequality without recourse to saying 'somebody has got more than you'



Thinking temporally

- Can think of all the work that is involved to survive but not enough to change longitudinal experiences of deprivation
- If you can't invest in the present you can't invest in the future for yourself and your families
- This is how you can understand how relationships are classed, without falling into a situation where you have to describe class as a given state – an example of a sociological retreat to the present.
- Flip from thinking through changes in structures of society to the structure of change

Suggested readings

- Adam, B., (1990) *Time and Social Theory*, Polity Press
- Adam, B (1998) *Timescapes of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards*, Routledge
- Elias, N. (2007 edition) *An Essay on Time: v. 9 (Collected Works of Norbert Elias)*
- Nowotny H (1996) *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience*, Polity Press