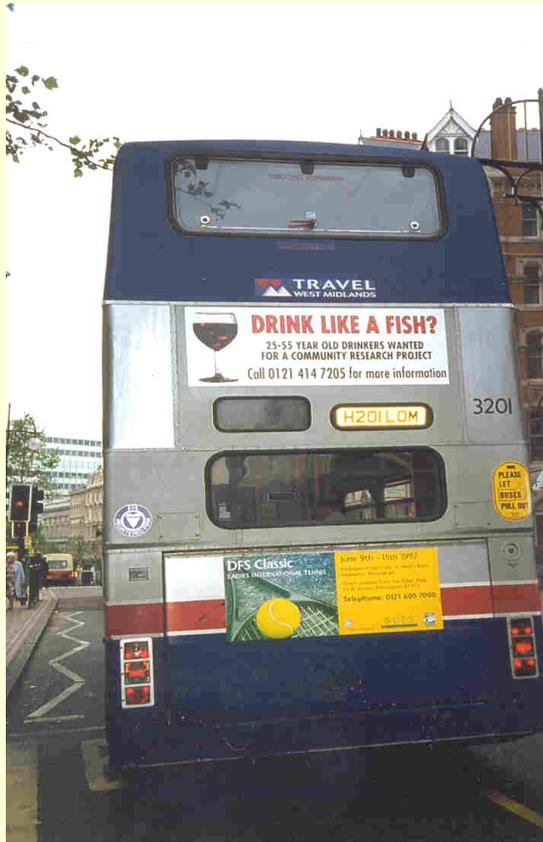


Drinking across the lifespan: Findings from the Birmingham Untreated Heavy Drinkers project

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Birmingham Untreated Heavy Drinkers research project



- A ten-year study of the 'natural history' of heavy drinking
- 500 participants recruited in 1997 from West Midlands community
- Untreated for alcohol problems in last 10 years
- At least 50 (men) 35 (women) units per week, for at least half weeks in past year
- Aged 25 – 55
- Interviewed every two years, using mixed methods
- Last interviews in 2007, with 259 participants

Data collection methods

- Interviewer administered computerised questions, including:
 - Health (Sf-36)
 - Health and social service usage
 - Leeds Dependence Questionnaire (Raistrick et al. 1994)
 - Readiness to change questionnaire (Rollnick et al. 1992)
 - Risky and intoxicated behaviours
 - Criminal justice service usage
 - Benefits and drawbacks
- Time Line Follow Back exercise (Last week's alcohol consumption)
- Changes in consumption over last 2 years (changes chart)
- Qualitative focus topic (e.g. abstinence, story of the last decade)

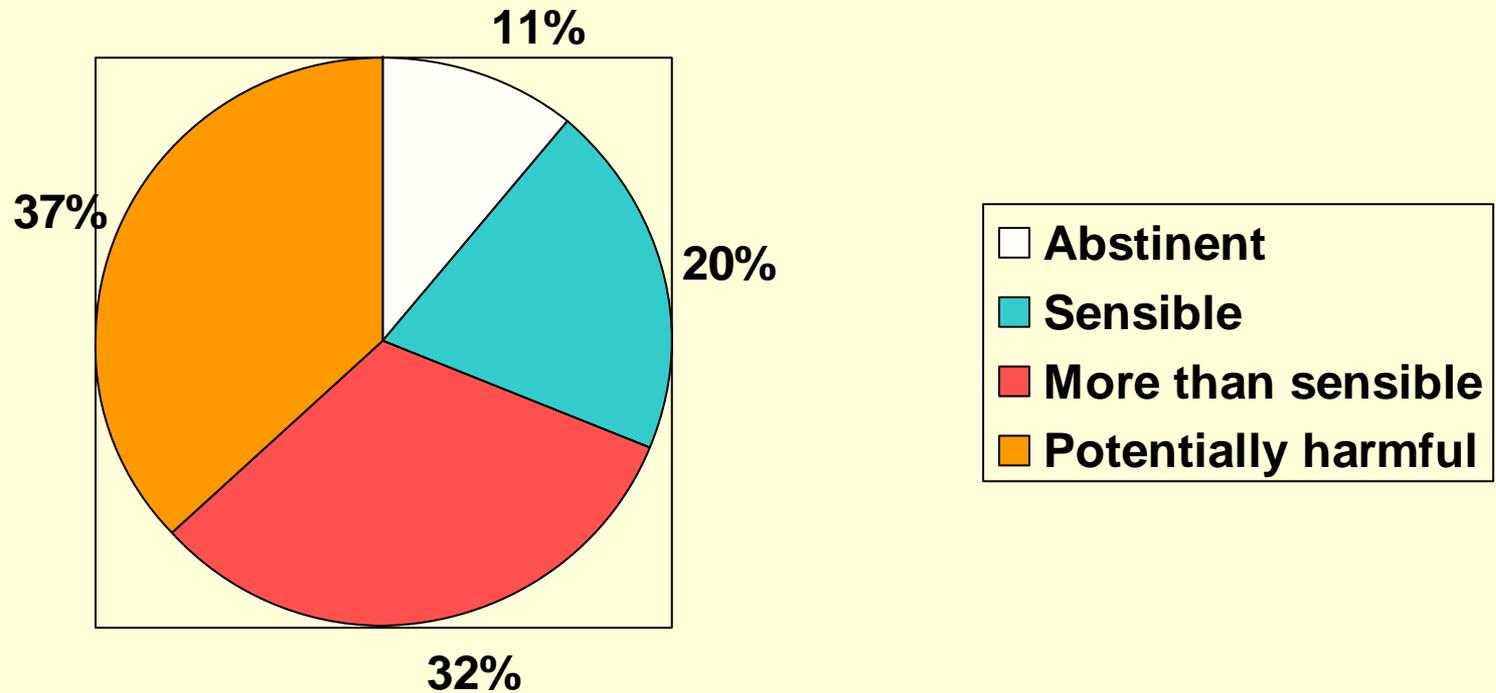
Some key questions

- 1) Are they still untreated heavy drinkers?
- 2) What does qualitative analysis suggest about life stage and drinking change?

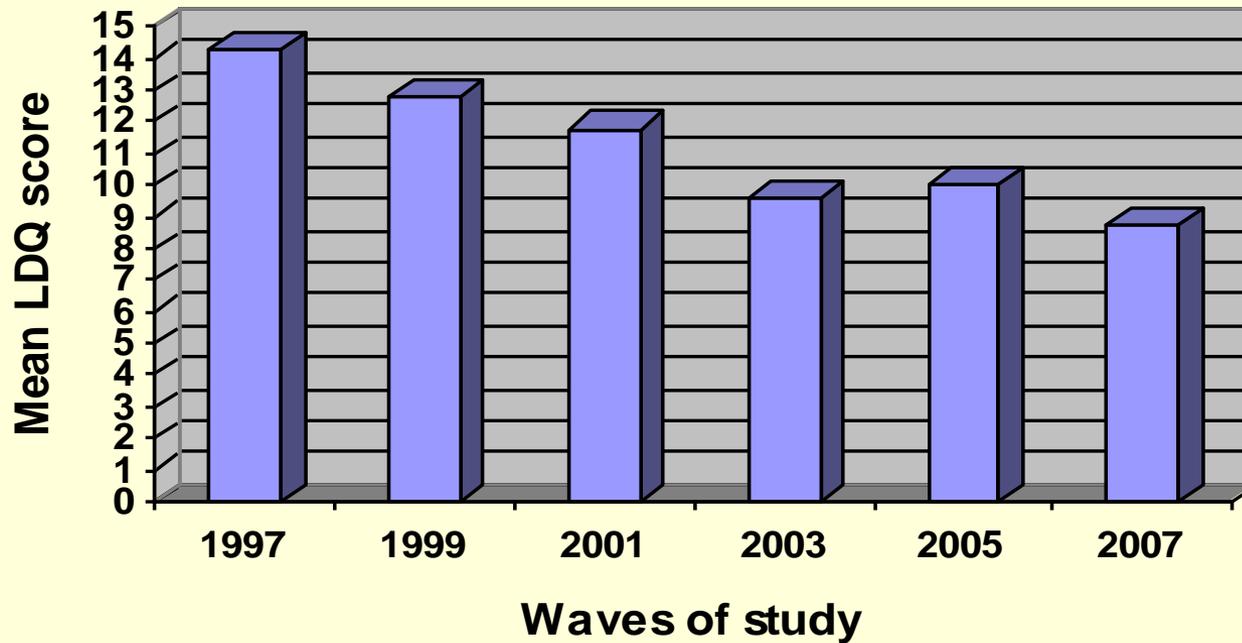
Are they still untreated heavy drinkers?

- Between 1997-2007, there has been a reduction in mean levels of:
 - Alcohol consumption (volume & frequency)
 - Dependence (LDQ)
- 49 participants (22%) have sought help or advice for their drinking over the last ten years
- Around 1 in 7 have had contact with treatment services at some point over the ten years

Drinking in 2007 (N=259)



Leeds Dependence Questionnaire (LDQ) Score 1997-2007 by gender (n = 259)



Preliminary (tentative) findings

- Considerable diversity within sample in drinking ‘careers’
- Three main clusters appear to be emerging:
 - Very heavy drinkers who stay very heavy
 - Very heavy drinkers who reduce quickly
 - Moderately heavy (and less dependent) drinkers who gradually reduce
- Further analysis needed to confirm these initial results and to identify predictors – work in progress!

Why keep heavy drinking?

A way of life

'My father was a drinker...we were just brought up with drink'.

'(It's) a part of my life. It is not important, it is just part of me'

Stress & Coping

'I think it's the only thing that relaxes me.'

Social glue & community

'You can only go one place on your own and that's to the pub'

'Pubs can be a nice warm safe environment where you might have a little bit of conversation; a refuge ...it's like an essential part of English culture.'

'It's the glue that makes somebody bother to phone you up.'

Key themes from interviews with 'reducers'

- **Life events:**
 - Health
 - Relationships (becoming a carer / parent, new relationship, relationship conflict, bereavement)
 - Employment (Losing job, starting new job/course)
 - Moved house
- **Practical reasons**
 - Wanting/needing to drive
 - To have more money
- **'Moving on':**
 - 'Growing out' of it
 - Wanting something different

How do they cut down?

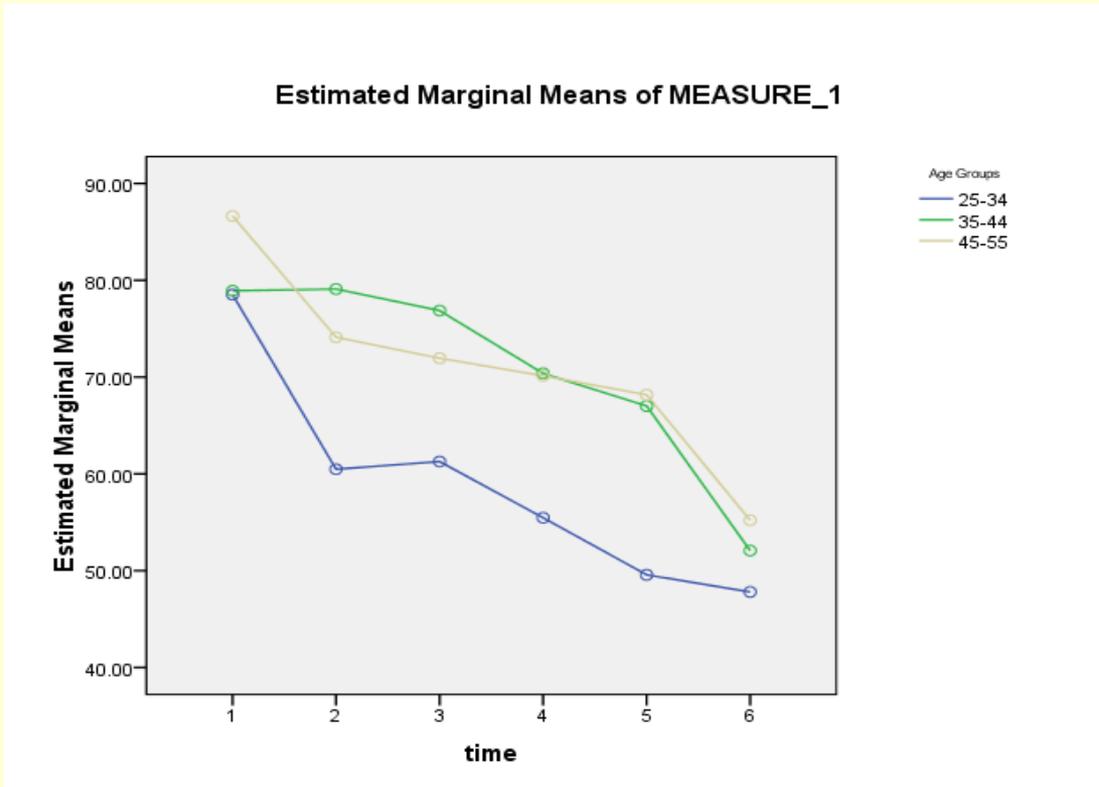
Professional help group

- On average, are heavier drinkers
- More likely to have received a comment from GP about drinking
- More likely to feel 'out of control'
- Less likely to have support from social networks
- Establishment of a supportive network viewed as a valuable aspect of treatment

'Self-help' group

- Collaboration with other heavy drinkers who are reducing drinking
- Importance of reciprocity
- Not wanting 'help': 'it's down to me'
- Not identifying with 'treatment' group / not needing help: 'I'm not bad enough'

How does drinking change over the adult lifespan?



Change in drinking over time by age group

Significant effect for time ($p < 0.005$), but interaction effect for age group not significant

Life stage and drinking change: qualitative analysis

- Narrative analysis of 28 interviews from final wave of project:
- 14 participants aged 30 at start of study ('the younger cohort')
- 14 participants aged 40 at start of study ('the older cohort')

The younger cohort: story types

Setting the scene:

A heavy drinking / partying lifestyle, or
A low point

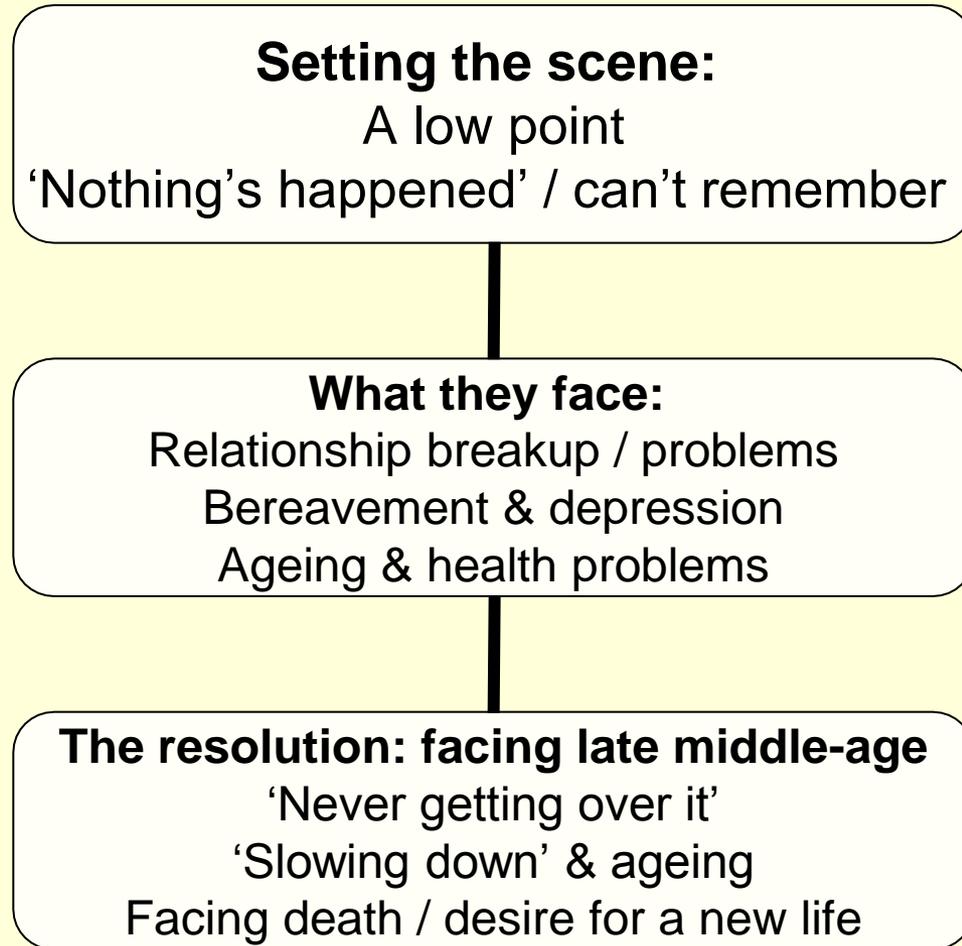
What they face:

Dwindling social life
Depression / dealing with the past / adversity
Parenthood and career change

The resolution: being 40

'Settling down', maturity & responsibility
Growth, changed priorities & meanings
Awareness of maturity, health & ageing

The older cohort: main story types



Younger group

'I was always out, always going out drinking until late, partying hard. And, um, now I'm in a settled relationship I've just calmed myself completely down [...] because I'm now a mom. That has just changed everything (Jackie)

'You look back and you think what were you doing back then?' (Alex)

Older group

Since the death of his father, John found that: *'Life has a little less meaning now'*

'[The pub's] my life. That's my family. Cos I haven't got anything else' (Dave).

"I'm just feeling old in my head, I can't shake it" (Angela).

Narrative analysis

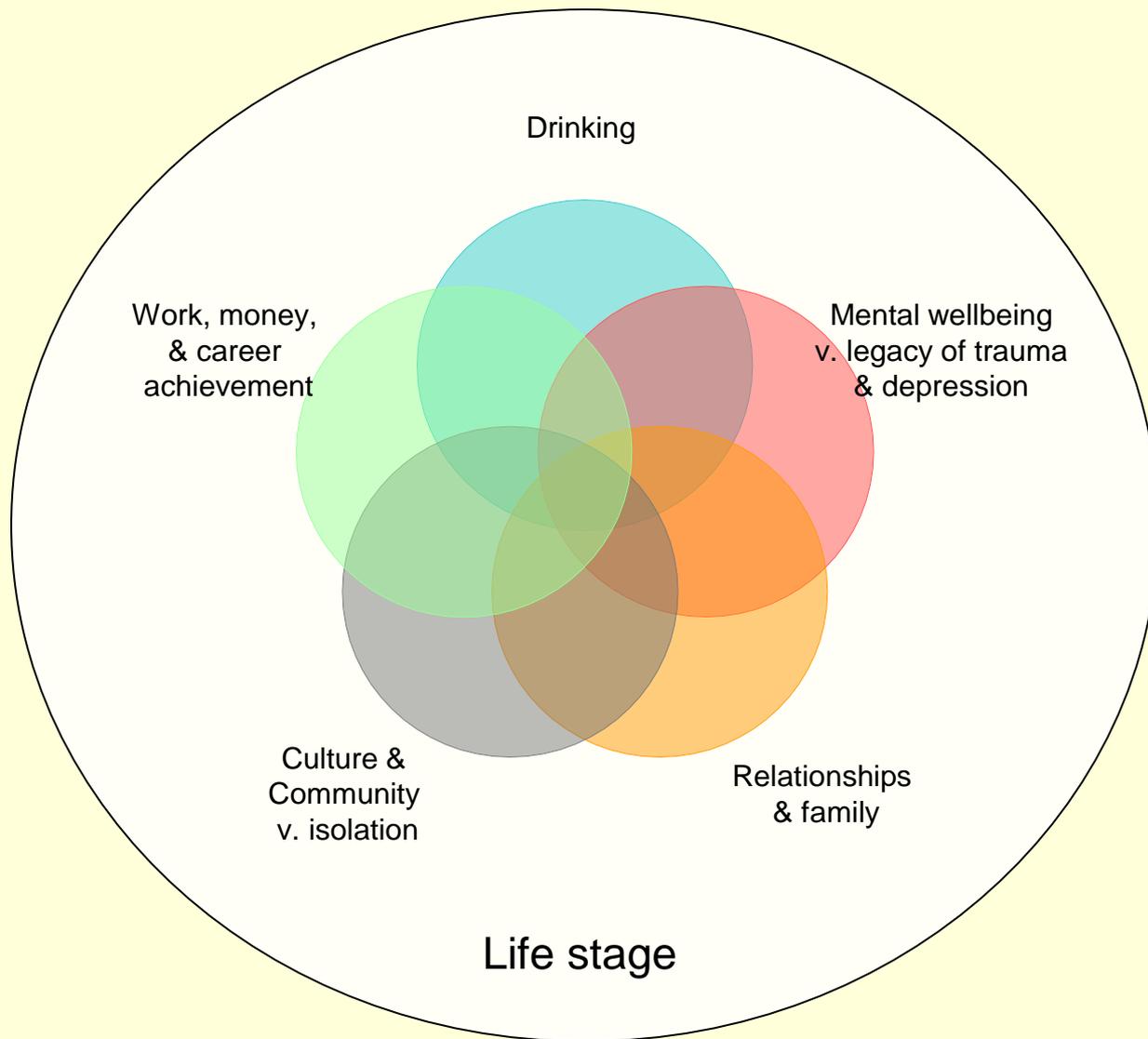
Younger age group

- 'Progressive' or 'stable' narratives
- Main story types:
 - Success stories
 - Stories of overcoming adversity
 - Stories of 'settling down'

Older age group

- 'Regressive' or 'stable' narratives
- Main story types:
 - Stories of overcoming adversity
 - Tragedies

Key elements in stories of the last decade



Some key questions

- 1) Are they still untreated heavy drinkers?
- 2) What does qualitative analysis suggest about life stage and drinking change?

Emerging trajectories

- **Continuous heavy drinkers:** high dependence, drinking central to identity, relationships, activities & community
- **Fluctuators:** move in & out of heavy drinking depending on life circumstances
- **'Treatment' group:** high dependence, feel 'out of control', gain social support through treatment
- **Natural recovery group:** less dependent, 'maturing out' (at any age), reduce drinking in response to changed life circumstances & responsibilities

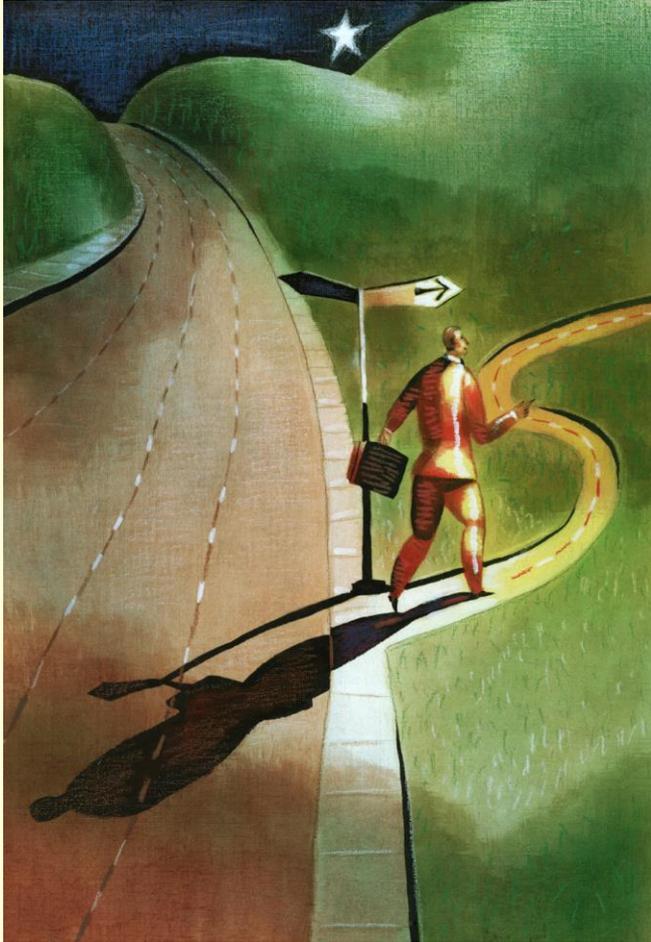
Factors in maintenance & change

- **Maintenance**

- Relationships & community (the pub) as important maintenance factors
- Alcohol perceived as the central coping mechanism
- Difficulties in overcoming adversity

- **Change**

- Participants' *own understandings* of change is often linked to significant life events. These events are often to do with relationships and/or life stage
- Health may be salient, but mainly if it forms a significant life event
- A sense of agency and control
- Resilience in overcoming adversity
- Positive relationships
- Focus, structure and meaning



**The long and
winding road to the
final report...**

**Thank you for
listening**