Everyday lives can be studied from many different perspectives which in turn raise different methodological challenges. Sometimes the focus is on the micro level: on the habitual and everyday or quotidian aspects of daily life. A particular challenge therefore is to understand how everyday practices change or stay the same. In other studies - or indeed in the same study - we may also need to make sense of micro level contemporaneous data about everyday lives in the context of the specific times and places to which they refer. It is particularly important, for example, to analyse what may be assumed to be timeless social transitions, for example the transition of young people from financial and emotional dependence on their families to greater independence, in relation to the opportunity structures available at particular times and in relation to the social and geographical locations of young people and their families. The point here is to take account of how the wider social and historical context itself changes as well as the practices of the actors whose lives we study. Further, given that our understanding of the changes in society and the ways aspects of the social stay the same are based to some considerable extent on soliciting informants’ accounts, it is important to interrogate these accounts in ways that address the gap between what people do and what people say they do, in particular by bringing into our analysis a sensitivity to how narratives about past or current practices are shaped by present time perspectives.

The paper will focus on three particular approaches. First, it will discuss social practice perspectives that address the habitual or taken for granted practices that constitute the everyday. Second, it will suggest the importance of historicising people’s lives, in particular setting them in the historical contexts in which lives unfold and to which informants may not refer but which it is necessary for analysts to bring to bear in sociological interpretations. These two approaches in turn suggest that we as researchers need to interrogate the stories that people recount about personal and family lives ‘in order to be able to disentangle different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change’ (Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou 2013 p2). The third approach therefore involves adopting a narrative perspective. The paper will illustrate how in several empirical studies these approaches have been applied in practice, in particular the research methods adopted.
“DOING” FAMILY ACROSS DISTANCE AND NATIONAL BORDERS:
CONCEPTUAL TOOLS FOR RESEARCH

LAURA MERLA

In order to fully understand family life, which is increasingly performed in a context of geographical mobility, and where co-residence tends to lose its centrality, researchers need to develop new conceptual tools that cross disciplinary boundaries. This conference builds on the research I have conducted over the past 10 years on the maintenance of family ties and solidarities across geographical distance and national borders. Here I will present a conceptual framework for understanding the dialectical relation between geographical distance and emotional proximity in family life (Merla, François & Jansen, 2014), that combines insights from sociology and psychology, and I will illustrate it with empirical examples from my research on transnational families.