

Editorial

John Bynner

Executive Editor

This Issue of *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies (LLCS)* brings with it important news about longitudinal and life course studies, signalling a new era for the development of the field. There has been massive new investment in new longitudinal research resources, including the US *National Children's Study (NCS)* and the French *Étude Longitudinale Française depuis l'Enfance (ELFE)*, *Growing Up in Australia (GUA)*, *Growing up in Ireland (GUI)*, the *German National Education Panel*, which includes a cohort followed from birth, and the new UK 2012 birth cohort study - yet to be named. So despite the economic upheavals of the last two years, and the ongoing recession, recognition of the need for an evidence base founded on long term longitudinal resources to support the policy process, now needs no further justification. Other governments are following suit throughout the world.

Closer to home, but also of much significance to the Journal, is the decision to establish the international *Society for Longitudinal and Life Course Studies (SSLCS)* that will be formally ratified at its first annual general meeting and conference at Clare College, Cambridge on September 22nd. The decision in principle to set up the Society was taken at last year's Longview conference at the same venue. An Interim Executive Committee was appointed to agree a draft constitution and make arrangements for the conference and elections for the Executive Committee – see the 'News and Events' section for the results.

The importance of the Society was evident from the 150 people who signed up to become 'Foundation' Members' and elected the Executive Committee. One of the committee's first tasks is to agree the programme for the conference mentioned above, which we see as a major platform for the communication of longitudinal and life course research findings *en route* to publication in *LLCS*. One of the Society's other major tasks in the coming year is to take over responsibility from Longview for *LLCS*. So again the news about the Society is integral to the future of the Journal.

In this Issue of the Journal, three papers are published, each on a different facet of longitudinal and life course research.

The first paper by Michael Wadsworth puts on record the origins of the first major British birth cohort study, the National Survey of Health and Development, which began in 1946. The paper draws out strongly the scientific and policy context that drove the decision to set up the study and shaped its aims, including falling fertility and the social gradient in infant mortality. It also makes the point, which is common to most if not all these early longitudinal research enterprises, that without the energy and enthusiasm of an inspirational Chief Investigator, James Douglas, the study might never have got beyond the stage of the first perinatal mortality survey with which it began. This contrasts with the UK situation today where the government funded Economic and Social Research and Medical Research Councils take for granted that their job is to invest in large scale longitudinal "research resources". The 1946 study was also important in pioneering the whole range of research techniques necessary for longitudinal study, including methods of data collection and maintenance of contact with the survey sample.

The second paper, which was a joint prize-winning entry by Dylan Kneale for last year's Neville Butler Memorial Prize, uses data from the two following birth cohort studies, 1958 and 1970, to examine the interesting question of the effect of parents' educational expectations on the timing of their children (in this case the cohort members) becoming parents. The argument is that early parenthood is set against the opportunity costs of loss of earning capacity and other indicators of achievement in the labour market the educational achievement predicts. In using a two cohort comparison, the paper underlines the important distinction between relative and absolute measures of early parenthood. The former is defined as the first quartile range of the ages of first births for the parents of a given cohort, hence constant over time. The second is defined as the section of the population of cohort members giving birth during their teens, an absolute measure, which through social and cultural shifts has been steadily contracting with time. The paper demonstrates that parental educational expectations for their children, play a significant part in the decisions

involved in especially motherhood, as measured in terms of the first age quartile. These can override those other family factors such as socio-economic status that have been shown in the past to influence early parenting, as measured by absolute age.

The third paper, from the other joint winner of the NBM Prize 2009, Simon Whitworth and Maria Portanti, is again devoted to fertility, this time drawing on the data available through the UK Office of National Statistics 'Longitudinal Study (LS)'. The LS is based on 1% of the census population - over 600,000 individuals each year - linked from one census to the next and augmented between censuses by vital registration data. The focus of analysis reported in their paper is the determinants of childlessness, i.e. what characterises women who remain childless throughout their adult life? They use an appropriate "slice" of the whole longitudinal LS dataset comprising the sub-sample of women born between 1956 and 1960, investigating the relationships between lifelong fertility outcomes and other characteristics. Apart from the structural features of women's lives such as marriage, cohabiting and single status, childlessness can be identified with a distinct group characterised by socio-economic characteristics. The study shows both the potential of the LS dataset for large scale analysis of this kind, but also its limitations in being restricted to census and vital registration data. In this sense it provides a useful way of benchmarking the results of more detailed longitudinal studies - such as the birth cohort study and the household panel study - in relation to such phenomena as childlessness.

Apart from papers, this Issue of the Journal also carries 'News and Events' of interest in the world of longitudinal and life course research to readers. It also includes, for the first time, one of the new developments for the Journal, the periodic publication of "tutorials", reviewing methodology in different areas of longitudinal data analysis. The first tutorial given by Harvey Goldstein and Bianca De Stavola, is devoted to a topic of central importance in longitudinal research, '*repeated measures analysis*', and offers easy access to a goldmine of useful information about the main techniques.

The next LLCS publication will be a Special Issue devoted to "cognitive capital", and what can we learn about the evolving nature of this

important theoretical and policy construct by tracing its development through the five British birth cohort studies starting in 1946 and continuing with new studies in 1958, 1970, 1992 and 2000. This thematic approach, based this time on a Nuffield Foundation-funded seminar series, will be a common one in Special Issues over the next two years, of which upwards of eight are in the pipeline. However the Editorial Board's policy will be to ensure there is always space for individual papers and many Issues will continue to be devoted entirely to them.

On 8th February 2010, there was a meeting of the Editorial Committee comprising section editors and associate editors, to consider a number of strategic issues regarding the Journal. Major policy themes arising from the meeting included the commitment to build a world-wide readership and authorship in every way possible. A steady flow of papers is the lifeline of the Journal on which its future success depends. Another decision is to expand the Journal to include easily accessible tutorials on key topics in longitudinal analysis. The first of these, appearing in this Issue, is the tutorial style paper just considered.

Another new venture is special papers, volunteered or commissioned of three kinds:

- Accounts of the longitudinal research landscapes in a particular country
- Descriptions of longitudinal studies of major international significance
- Overviews of longitudinal research on a particular substantive topic

We welcome suggestions for contributions in this area.

Book reviews are also now firmly on the agenda; three are reviewed in this issue of LLCS and more are steadily coming in. ***We need volunteers for reviewing***, so if you are interested in receiving a book for review (and keeping it!), please let us know immediately so we can register your name on our reviewers' panel.

Reports on research projects using the major longitudinal research resources frequently appear on the relevant Centre websites. The Journal will regularly list what is newly available - see the News and Events section for the first one. We look forward to receiving details (including the weblinks) of more reports of this kind of likely interest to LLCS readers.