

## Changing times, life course shifts: response to the Review Consortium on 'A Companion to Life Course Studies: the Historical Context of the British Birth Cohort Studies'

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Compiling a book with the title "A Companion to Life Course Studies" as applied to the 'British Birth Cohort Studies' was a challenging enterprise. The British birth cohort studies chart, effectively, the lives of a series of generations born since the Second World War, each in their own way reflecting the different sets of economic and political circumstances, and scientific and technological innovations to which these generations were exposed. At the same time, all the members of the cohorts were subject to the same sets of 'period' effects but at different ages. And each starting off at a different time experienced different circumstances at the same ages as they got older – 'age and cohort effects'. The challenge is in distinguishing one effect from another as exemplified by uncertainties about where the line was to be drawn between generations. The book identifies four: 'Adversity to Affluence', ('never had it so good') or 'Baby Boomers' (1946-1960), 'Permissive Society' (1960-1970), 'Individualised Society' (1975-1990), 'Digital World' (1990 to present day). Determining what in the external environment was bringing about the change depends on the age and life course stage at which we observe them.

John Welshman's (2011) review of our book expresses disappointment with the broad backcloth approach adopted. But it is difficult to see how the objective of framing or contextualising cohort members' lives could have been achieved without it. Welshman argues that the book should have focused much more on what amounts to the interaction between individual lives in the different cohorts and their historical context, shifting attention throughout much more to the cohort members themselves and their life histories, and away from the context itself. But that would have required our authors to have had access to two sets of expertise, historical and scientific, making the point that these are usually to be found on parallel rather than intersecting tracks. It is also exactly what the book argues for: namely much more inter-cohort comparative analysis which not only takes into account, but also makes use of, the

cohort differences in exposures. Our purpose was to inform those who analyse birth cohort data about the contextual effects on life course development and to encourage new analyses that would make more effective use of them.

The three contributors to the Book Review Symposium *A Companion to Life Course Studies: the social and historical context of the British birth cohort studies*, John Goldthorpe (2011), Emily Murray, (2011) and Barbara Maughan (2011), by and large, accept the book as presented. Its seven chapters set out in the domains of politics, family, economy, education, employment and skills, health, and leisure, an historical overview of what was happening over the period 1946 to 2010, as the different birth cohorts experienced them. Information about the cohorts' progression over the whole period is supplied in a potted history of the studies (1946, 1958, 1970, Avon, and Millennium cohort studies) in the initial overview chapter of the book and returned to in the final chapter. That chapter brings together the main cross-cutting themes of the preceding chapters and offers, beyond that, a more speculative appraisal of next research steps. The themes start with 'life course and generation', then range through 'shifting boundaries', 'collectivism' versus 'individualism', 'science and technology revolution', 'disadvantage, social mobility and inequality', 'individualisation and risk' and 'cultural and recreational continuity and change'. The research ideas are organised under the seven life domains that structure the historical accounts.

The authors were invited to contribute to the book as experts on the history of the period encompassed by their specialist topic areas - hence their relatively limited knowledge, for the most part, of the detailed findings of each cohort study. This is other than the few words addressed to them, with our help, at the end of each chapter - re-enforcing the point that although separated, how vitally connected the two aspects, history and individual experience as captured by the changing life course, really are.

Different life courses, begun at different times, will have been shaped differently by the external context starting from conception or, in some respects, the context of their parents' generation.

In their reviews, both Goldthorpe and Maughan helpfully differentiate historical change that is step-like, sudden or acute, from that which is continuous or more gradual. They each identify the step-change historical period effect as offering opportunities for 'before and after' studies of the impact of change. That kind of research can, of course, be undertaken in a study of a single population. The British cohort studies together offer, across a series of cohorts spanning 50 years, the opportunity for comparison of life courses and capital acquired (human, educational, social, psychological, economic and health) pre-change circumstances, with those whose experience was entirely post-change. For example, the cohort at secondary schools when the selective secondary system was predominant, can be compared with cohorts educated in the comprehensive system and those whose experience was only partial, as Local Education Authorities took different amounts of time to implement the change and some never did.

In other words comparative inter-cohort studies provide the opportunity to ask, in the sense of a 'natural experiment', how policy influenced the lives of individuals in the long-term. Murray's review suggests the value, for policy impact studies, of knowing the developmental and health histories of those growing up in areas that later became prime targets of de-industrialisation. Such histories could then be compared with those of others in the same cohort, who had grown up in more stable areas.

Equally there is unique research value in the opportunity to compare the effects of what Goldthorpe in his review calls continuous, directional historical change. For example, mental and physical health across the life course of those who grew up in the immediate post-war period of predominantly traditional single earner nuclear families and food rationing, can be compared with the health of people growing up in times of very different family and health behaviour norms. Such comparative research can take the form of studies of opportunities for classes and sub-groups as well as for individuals, and can examine how the processes of mental and physical resilience and vulnerability develop at the individual level. Taking account of historical change will also provide opportunities for insight into policy effects at the national level. For instance, comparative research

using the British birth cohorts is well-placed to investigate pro-social behaviour and its determinants at a time of widening inequality. This will be of particular relevance for Government policy initiatives such as the 'Big Society' that look towards new roles for charities and the expansion of volunteering.

The oldest British birth cohort sample population is now aged 65 years, and it seems likely that at least the two subsequent cohorts will also be followed-up into later life. Essential questions about the health and intellectual processes of later life will thus be open to study in the context of experience across the whole of their lives. The differences between these cohorts' whole life experiences will be great, and will provide an invaluable opportunity for inter-cohort comparative research to study how step-change, salient events have their impact, and how long that impact affects the lives of those who experience it. For example the period of high risk of unemployment during the 1980s hit the 1946 cohort members in mid-working life, and affected their subsequent prospects of returning to employment. In contrast, the high risk of unemployment impacted early on the working life of the 1958 cohort, when in due course such opportunities were still likely to be open.

However, as Maughan notes, these same kinds of period effects which confer research value, also bring methodological challenges in the form of cohort differences in questions asked, and scales and measures used. The research and policy questions that the studies addressed were themselves influenced by their historical context, as continuous change in the social and life sciences demanded new and improved measures. For instance, new developments in and demands for the measurement of wellbeing, are now being addressed in the British cohorts, but mostly only indirect methods can be used to assess wellbeing prevalence in earlier periods. And although, in general, attrition in the older studies is remarkably similar, its components (death, refusal, living overseas, lost contact) vary between cohorts, and require compensatory statistical weighting (Martin et al 2006). Response of more recent times has been considerably reduced in all kinds of survey research, and it is evident that future data collections, especially in newly established cohort studies, will require new approaches to data collection and to sample maintenance.

The series of British birth cohort studies is, as Goldthorpe reminds us, what C. Wright Mills described as the 'intersection of biography and

history'. They are also the intersection of biography, history and biology. They can facilitate study not only of the impact of socio-economic circumstances on lifetime health and survival, but also the impact of changing chances of lifetime health and survival on the structure and functioning of society. In addition, at least three of these life course studies have sources of DNA. That and their information on the lives of their parents' generation, and in some instances also on the offspring generation, provides the potential to study the impact of history on the health of individuals, not least through the search for cross-generational environmental and health behavioural influences on genetic effects, or epigenetics (Schooling and Leung 2010). Goldthorpe raises the question of alternative hypotheses to account for health inequalities in mortality, rather than the 'psycho-social environment' hypothesis given in the Health chapter. The psychosocial hypothesis postulates that prolonged exposure to mental stress (e.g. associated with perceived socioeconomic inequality or other adversity) is manifested in adverse change in neuroendocrine, autonomic metabolic, and immune response to chronic stress. The neo-material hypothesis is concerned with the direct physical effect of poor conditions. The Health chapter concentrated on the psychosocial hypothesis because it goes beyond the scope of the neo-material hypothesis, suggesting a biologically plausible account of how environmental exposures 'get under the skin' of the individual and interact with genetic inheritance, to become illness and processes of health change with age. And it can only be tested in long-term studies of individual lives.

In preparing *The Companion to Life Course Studies* we felt keenly the need for a history of the British national birth cohort studies, and the influences that affected their early development and continuation. Some historical work is already published or in progress (Bynner and Joshi 2007; Wadsworth 2010; Welshman 2011) but a systematic review of the archives of the studies and their funders would address the important questions raised by Goldthorpe about the differences between the studies in concerns and focus, the reasons for their spacing in time, and the apparent omission of two in the series. The 30 year gap in the national series between the 1970 and 2000 studies is problematic for analysts because, as Goldthorpe notes, it closed off the possibility of monitoring the effects on the life course of the massive socio-industrial and economic transformation

that took place, especially in the early part of the period (1982 onwards) when, if the series had been maintained, a new birth cohort study would have been due. It is notable that David Willetts, Minister of State for Universities and Science in the current UK Government, whose 2011 book *The Pinch* focuses on the way the current adult generation *Took Their Children's Future – And Why They Should Give it Back*, apologised publicly in September 2010 for the decision of the Conservative Government in 1984 not to support the proposed new birth cohort study. Only the release of Government archives in 2014 will reveal the nature of the expert advice that lay behind that decision.

It is not surprising in the light of the above, but encouraging nevertheless, that all three reviewers recognise the merits of the book's aim, believing that much cohort analysis and interpretation in the past has suffered from inadequate recognition of the period and cohort effects which interact with cohort lives. Goldthorpe's focus on life course continuities, discontinuities, and turning points, draws attention to the key periods when context (period) effects matter most. These are powerfully revealed, in his view, by four examples including the rapid rise in inequality from the 1990s onwards, and the collapse of heavy industry and with it traditional patterns for entering the labour market at age 16 years. Other, perhaps more pervasive societal shifts, include those driven by changes in (moral) norms relating to premarital sex and the breakdown of marriage, and its increasingly common replacement by cohabitation. The fourth example resides in the paradox that while lives are getting longer, in successive cohorts, inequality increases, as graphically brought home by Murray in her account of the effects of de-industrialisation on mental and physical health. It is clear that our authors picked up in their specialist areas the key historical drivers of generational 'turning points', while also noting that the other periods showing relative stability and consolidation over a period of time are inevitably less sharply drawn.

The key point to observe is that the birth cohorts have tended to be studied independently rather than together, each being seen as demonstrating the growth of individuals in different environments. This is within a scientific framework for investigating the life course that assesses the outcomes, as Murray puts it, of 'exposure' to, 'treatments', reflected by different environments for which outcomes will vary or not in accordance with the postulated bio-physiological and

genetic mechanisms in play. Maughan's approach, in the tradition of Elder's (1974) *Children of the Great Depression*, concentrates more on conceptualising the life course as a continuous process of development interacting with, and consequently shaped by, changing circumstances in the context of linked lives, social and institutional structures, the timing of events and the power of human agency. She stresses that the *timing* of events as key drivers of trajectory and life course shifts is where the developmental science interest in historical change principally lies.

Goldthorpe also argues, with respect to research designs and commitments, that the picture needs to be further enhanced to map fully the historical context of the cohort studies. The essential complement to the cohort study of individual lives will always be continuous repeated (cross-sectional) surveys based on nationally representative samples to monitor changes in the population parameters through which period effects are described. As Maughan notes in her review, the absence from the book of comment on the effect of migration is a reflection of the design that fixes in time the population that a new birth cohort represents - the cohort effect. In her terms 'the social, political and economic landscapes are constantly changing, creating unique constellations of opportunities, expectations and constraints that form the backdrop to the lives of each new generation'. These constellations need to be understood to bring context

fully into the cohort study framework - a very challenging task. She also notes the significance of social attitudes as potential instigators and moderators of the changes observed, and suggests the need for more coverage of these for the purposes of cohort comparison.

We are grateful to our reviewers for giving qualified approval for what the book set out to do. We appreciate their working within our framework to draw out from the book the importance of the historical backcloth in which the cohort members live their lives, but also pointing up the challenges in exploiting to the maximum extent the scientific benefit of the historical data available. It can be argued that the British birth cohort studies are currently experiencing a step change in perceptions of their usefulness, as their comparative value begins to be appreciated for policy purposes and for social and life sciences research. New funding for the 2012 birth cohort study and the establishment of the Cohort Research Facility to support the birth cohort series as a whole, clearly reflect that change and the new perception of the value of life course research. The new phase of cohort study should include the systematic recording of qualitative and quantitative context information from official sources and from the cohort members themselves. In the meantime we hope that cohort study analysts will make much more in their interpretations of the changing historical context of personal time.

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