

Book Review Symposium¹

A Companion to Life Course Studies: the social and historical context of the British birth cohort studies. Michael Wadsworth and John Bynner (Eds) 2011 Routledge, New York and Oxford: 237pp ISBN 978-0-415-49540-0

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The primary aim of this collection is to provide a resource for users of the series of British birth cohort studies - whether researchers seeking to exploit the accumulated data-sets or members of policy communities wishing to draw on the vast array of research findings that have already emerged from these studies. The collection brings together seven review essays dealing with different aspects of British economic and social history over the period covered by the studies: i.e. from the end of the Second World War down to the present day. In this way, a rather comprehensive historical backcloth is created against which the life courses of the members of the successive cohorts may be better analysed and understood.

The editors introduce the collection by giving a brief but still highly informative account of the origins and the progress of the five cohort studies that are currently in train: the MRC National Survey of Health and Development (the 1946 cohort); the National Child Development Study (the 1958 cohort); the 1970 British National Birth Cohort Study; the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (the 1991/2 cohort); and the Millennium Cohort Study. Two relatively minor but still intriguing questions that are prompted but not taken up are the following. First, why are the data of the earliest study still not readily available in the public domain? Second, where exactly does responsibility lie for the fact that no cohort study was started in the early 1980s - Mrs Thatcher is usually blamed but what was the full story?

In general, the authors of the review essays, and no doubt the editors too, are to be commended for the high standards of factual accuracy that appear to have been attained in dealing with some complex narratives and topics - the perhaps inevitable Homeric nod coming when the 1945 Labour government is at one point placed under the leadership of Harold Wilson. The essays also for the most part display a nice balance in dealing with academically or politically controversial issues -

those by Hugh Pemberton on the economy and by Lynda Clarke and Ceridwen Roberts on the family, being exemplary in this regard. However, one instance in which some one-sidedness on a major issue might be thought to arise, comes in Michael Wadsworth's contribution on health. While Wadsworth rightly notes the growing emphasis now placed in accounting for ill-health on the interaction of genetic and environmental influences over the entire life course, he appears largely to equate this approach with that of Michael Marmot and Richard Wilkinson who focus on the role of psychosocial processes operating via stress and the effects of stress hormones. No reference is made to the alternative, 'neo-materialist' approach which, on present evidence, would seem no less persuasive (see e.g. Lynch et al 2000, 2004). One could expect that in clarifying and perhaps in some way resolving the difficult questions that here arise, the cohort studies will in fact play an increasingly important part in the years ahead.

It is likely that researchers will most frequently make use of this volume by turning to relevant chapters in search of various kinds of contextual information that they need to obtain or confirm. Within a few weeks of receiving the book, I have myself already benefited in this way by resorting to the contributions on education by Gary McCulloch and on the labour market by David Ashton and John Bynner. However, taken as a whole, the collection has a larger significance in providing valuable pointers - some of which are spelled out in the editors' concluding chapter - to the research opportunities and strategies that are available to those drawing on the rich data of the cohort studies.

In this regard, what should, as a preliminary, be recognised is what research questions the cohort studies are *not* well designed to answer. The cohort studies do not usually provide the data-sets of choice for determining long-term population trends. What is in this case required is not cohort data but data from repeated cross-sectional studies. For example, results of analyses made by economists (Blanden et al 2004) of changes in inter-

¹ The next LLCS issue will include an author response to the reviews

BOOK REVIEWS

generational income mobility as between the 1958 and 1970 cohorts, have been taken to show, especially in political and media circles, that social mobility in Britain is in decline. But the comparison of two birth cohorts, just twelve years apart, is an inadequate basis for conclusions of this kind. The economists have in fact to turn to the cohort studies because, regrettably, they are the only sources of data on inter-generational income mobility available to them in Britain. But if mobility is considered in terms of social class, in which case data of a repeated cross-sectional kind extending over several decades can be obtained, then a very different picture emerges - one of an essential constancy in the endogenous mobility regime (Goldthorpe and Mills 2008).

Where the cohort studies come into their own is where the focus of interest is on the life courses that individuals follow and, in particular for social scientists, on the relation between different aspects of these life courses and the differing economic and socio-cultural contexts within which, over time, they are located: or where the focus is, as Wright Mills memorably put it in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), on 'the intersection of biography and history'. The essays brought together in the collection serve to indicate the several contrasting types of situation that may in this respect be identified and exploited.

In some instances it is evident that the life courses of members of the cohorts studied are set within processes of change that are of a continuous, directional kind - such as, say, the decline in mortality, the rise in material living standards, or the increase in time spent in, and qualifications gained from, education. Life courses are then chiefly shaped by what would be described as period effects. At whatever age one compares members of successive cohorts, those born later will, on average, be at a lower risk of death, have greater consumer power, be better educated etc than those born earlier.

However, in other instances, while period effects could again be said to operate, they bear on

cohort members' lives in a different, more discontinuous way. This is the case when 'step' changes occur which in their impact, whether at a particular stage in the life course or more extensively, essentially divide birth cohorts into 'before' and 'after'. One such change would be the sharp rise in income inequality that took place in the 1980s and early 1990s - with wide ranging consequences; but a yet more striking example is provided by the rapid shift in social norms and actual behaviour in regard to pre-marital sex and cohabitation that was triggered off in the early 1970s and that has since transformed the nature of partnership and family formation.

Finally, though, a further contrast arises where the changes that shape life courses are ones of a fluctuating kind as, for example, in fertility or in economic conditions. In this case, specific cohort effects come into play. As a result of being born in certain years, rather than earlier or later, some children are 'baby boomers', others not; some young people enter the labour market in times of economic expansion, others in times of recession. And the cohort effects that ensue may be of a lasting kind - as can be seen, say, in adverse features of the work histories of men in the 1958 cohort which can be traced back to their first years in the labour market under the severe conditions of the early 1980s and which set then them at a long-term disadvantage relative to men in both the 1946 and the 1970 cohorts (Gregg 2001; Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2011).

These differing forms of interaction between historical change and individual lives are at the heart of many present-day academic and policy issues, and the birth cohort studies are the prime resource that we have for dealing with them. A former Chief Executive of the ESRC once understandably described the cohort studies as 'the crown jewels of British social research'. But while the crown jewels are for symbolic display, the cohort studies are for use. Wadsworth and Bynner's volume will contribute greatly to making this use ever more effective.

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BOOK REVIEWS

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The earliest of the British birth cohorts, the 1946, began over 65 years ago, while the youngest is a mere 11 years of age. Over the intervening years a profound transformation has occurred in what it means to live a 'British way of life', with each cohort providing an unique snapshot into the lives of a separate generation of Britons.

From the first page to the last, this book is very aptly named. It is not a summary of all that has been learnt from the birth cohorts but a companion. It is meant to sit next to the volumes of findings produced from the cohort data and help the reader make sense of the context which produced the findings. What is unique about this book and what the authors themselves allude to in the preface, is that Wadsworth and Bynner are former directors of three out of the five major birth cohorts. This book is akin to sitting down to a cup of tea with these two men, and seven colleagues, soaking up their expert knowledge of history and culture over the period when the birth cohort data were collected. They take you behind the findings; show you the historical context by which the patterns of cohort members lives were formed.

The person who would experience the most benefit from this book would be someone new to life course epidemiology; the birth cohorts in particular. Reams of data on people's health, social circumstances, education, cognitive abilities, diet – to name a few – have been compiled on millions of pages, converted to miles of electronic numbers, and stored across the UK. Faster processing speeds of computers allow us to crunch analyses unlike ever before. Yet at the end of the day these rich resources are only numbers on a page or frequencies in a computer. It takes the researcher knowing what forces have acted to put a particular set of numbers in a certain order in order to conjecture about causation. Otherwise, our data is just a rather large and expensive black box.

In addition to the novice, experienced

researchers have a few reasons to add this to their book shelf as well. We can all use a refresher of how populations of different ages may have been experiencing life differently, particularly if the exposures we are investigating have changed across our age populations. Knowing the general pattern by which exposures have been changing may also help us predict rates of disease in future to which the exposures we have been analyzing are linked.

This book would be of particular use for persons conducting work on data sets where subjects' historical exposures must be taken into consideration. I speak not from conjecture but personal experience. As a part of the Healthy Ageing across the Lifecourse (HALCYon) project, we have linked residential addresses across the lives of the 1946 birth cohort to examine when in life, area socioeconomic factors are important for physical performance, cognitive performance, and well-being in mid-life. One of the main results has been that the proportion of persons in an area with partly or un-skilled occupations, unemployment, and a lower educated population were particularly related to physical performance measures at age 53 years¹.

What became an important part of the project was being able to determine whether each of these measures represented the same construct historically. Turning the pages of this book McCulloch provides a nice background to the educational policy changes which led to a marked increase in the number of Britons attending school at all ages. Yet at the same time, Ashton and Bynner's chapter on the labour market shows the growing importance of education on job prospects and social standing. Therefore, differences in educational achievement could mean more for health outcomes during modern compared to historical periods. In addition, Pemberton's economic chapter became particularly interesting as it was realized that areas in England which had

BOOK REVIEWS

experienced the largest de-industrialization just so happened to share all three of the area measures most related to worse physical performance. One avenue of future research would then be to explore how de-industrialization could be influencing individual's health behaviours and risks of morbidity and mortality. Granted, this information may be available elsewhere but not in such a succinct and handy form.

This book however is not just a resource for figuring out the secrets of one birth cohort. When analysis is restricted to one birth cohort the findings will only reflect the exposures that particular age cohort experienced. A universal theme running through this work is the potential benefit of cross-cohort comparisons in understanding how decisions at the larger political, economic level, and social forces could be harnessed to improve the lives of Britons. Large changes in exposures within relatively short age/time bands presents a prime opportunity to examine which of these changes may have contributed to alterations in disease rates across the generations. For example, comparisons of the 1946 and 1958 cohorts in height and body mass index across the life course showed that the

younger cohort gained weight faster and became obese at younger ages²; surely reflecting the advent of the obesity epidemic in the 1980s. This is however only a comparison of two cohorts only 12 years apart in age. Work which encompassed the full age breadth of these cohorts and the societal changes which occurred within them could provide quite unique perspectives on the development of disease patterns.

The final chapter suggests many more areas of future research encompassing comparisons of the cohorts' political, family, educational, economic, and health experiences. Readers should take these suggestions as basic starting points; hints at the treasure trove of data that is available. In addition, Bynner and Wadsworth re-iterate the overarching themes which emerge from the book: four distinct cultural periods, the advent of globalization, decline of community in favour of the individual, technological advance, inequality, and cultural changes; an upstream perspective which can only be viewed by having compiled a breadth of work such as this. So take a step back, make a cup of tea, and read along with your 'companion' in this little slice of history.

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Elder's classic *Children of the Great Depression* (1974) provides compelling evidence of the impact of historical change on individual development: the adult life pathways of young people who lived through the economic collapse of the 1930s differed markedly depending on their age at the time when economic hardship struck. These observations - and many others like them - formed a key plank in the development of what is now known as the life course perspective on human development.

The economic changes facing the Berkeley and Oakland cohorts that Elder studied were sudden and acute, permeating all aspects of their families' lives. But it is not only cataclysmic events of this kind that have the potential to affect development. 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. Knowledge of these contextual

changes, whether dramatic or more modulated, is crucial for all studies taking a life course approach to longitudinal research.

This volume is designed to help with that task, mapping in key elements of the social and policy changes that faced the UK generations born since the end of the Second World War. The social history of this period has, of course, been extensively documented before. The purpose of this new book is a more focused one: to provide a 'companion' for researchers working on data from the five major UK birth cohort studies established in the UK between the 1940s and the turn of the new Millennium. To do this, the editors have drawn together experts in the fields of politics, economics, labour markets, education, health, family life and leisure, and asked them to contribute chapters with a quite specific brief: to sketch in key outlines of the social changes taking place in these areas in the decades since the end of World War II; to weave in accounts of related policy change; and to give

BOOK REVIEWS

pointers to the ways in which analyses of the cohort study data could benefit from this knowledge. The editors themselves contribute an introductory chapter giving an overview of the period, and of the cohort studies, and a concluding discussion drawing together the key themes that have emerged.

The result provides a vivid account of the major transformations that occurred in many aspects of British society over the post-war years. Inevitably, individual chapters vary somewhat in style and focus, but most are in themselves a 'good read', and many offer fascinating insights. Depending on their disciplinary background, most readers are likely to be familiar with the material covered in some chapters, and quite unfamiliar with that in others. For myself, for example, though I was broadly aware of the changes mapped out in relation to health and education, and very familiar with the trends in family demographics, the picture of our changing – or as it turns out, rather unchanging – use of leisure time was quite novel, and full of unexpected insights and treats. Bringing together the main threads of social policy development alongside the detail of social and political change is also an illuminating approach.

The main audience for this volume is the ever-growing cadre of UK and international researchers who use data from the British cohort studies to illuminate the unfolding of individual lives. How well will the book work for them? Understandably, perhaps, reports from these studies are often designed to explicate the influences on development that are traceable from within each data-set – often a complex and challenging task in itself. In almost all instances, however, studies of individual cohorts would be enriched by an awareness of the broader social context mapped out in this volume – and for comparisons across the cohorts, background data of this kind should arguably be mandatory reading. Linking the issues being examined in individual research studies to this broader background will not always be straightforward, and will require some work – but the pay-off in terms of increased understanding of

the factors that go to shape individual development is likely to be immense.

The chapters in this volume cover a broad spectrum of issues, spanning the massive changes in the family and in men and women's working lives occurring in the post-war decades; the changing economic and political landscape; and the major changes that took place in the provision of education and health care. Inevitably, perhaps, with their appetites whetted, many readers will be left wanting more. For me, this volume prompted questions about the ways in which these relatively 'broad-brush' changes in the social and political landscape influenced (and were influenced by) changing social attitudes, and how they impacted on more detailed aspects of the fabric of individual's day-to-day lives. In addition, there were some more major topics – most notably, perhaps, the shape and effects of the various waves of migration to the UK that occurred from the 1950s onwards – that received relatively little attention. These and other issues are, of course, documented elsewhere, and references to those accounts are included in this volume; one of the measures of its success will be its capacity to prompt longitudinal researchers to consult these wider sources of evidence in their future research.

Individually, each of the British birth cohort studies has already made remarkable contributions to our understanding of human development, and will continue to do so in the years to come. Together, they represent an unparalleled resource for examining the impact of social change on individual's life trajectories. Cohort comparative studies of this kind are demanding, and not surprisingly, perhaps, are relatively limited to date. This volume provides brief pointers to the existing literature in this area, and a wider range of suggested issues in which they could be developed further. For researchers willing to take up those challenges, this volume will be an essential – and a good - companion.

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