

## **Longitudinal Studies and the Life Course, the 1960s and 1970s**

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### **Introduction**

Today we consider social contexts essential for understanding human development and aging. But this was not always so. My professional career began at IHD when the pioneering longitudinal studies were focusing little attention on such life experiences or on the changing social worlds of the Study members. These experiences and changing contexts became a major concern to me in coding efforts, reflecting the training I had received in sociology and psychology.

I was assigned by the new IHD director, sociologist John Clausen, to the task of developing codebooks for the uncoded data on the Oakland Growth Study members, born in 1920 - 1921. What I have to say this evening briefly tells the story of my encounter with these data and the resulting coding efforts to represent the lives of the Oakland Ss in a changing world. These efforts led to my interest in the life course and historical forces. The archival work continued during the early 1970s when I returned to IHD on a sabbatical to work on the Berkeley Guidance sample, with birth dates of 1928-1929.

### **From UNC to U-C Berkeley**

John Thibaut, a distinguished social psychologist and a former student of Kurt Lewin, was a member of my dissertation committee at UNC-Chapel Hill. When I knew that I would be going to Berkeley to collaborate with John Clausen, I was elated and greeted Thibaut on campus with, "I am going to Berkeley." John responded, "Good luck. You are going to need it." I didn't know the full story behind this response at the time.

But as a sociologist with training in psychology I knew I was blessed with the good fortune of having landed in the home of three pioneering longitudinal studies, all with Study children born in the 1920s -the Berkeley Growth and Guidance Studies, headed by Nancy Bayley and Jean MacFarlane, respectively, and the Oakland Growth Study, directed by Harold Jones. I had entered the world of developmental and clinical psychology at the Institute "to study individuals, families, and their development over time."

With this new setting in mind, I thought I would have something to contribute by placing people on their changing life paths. As Edward Thompson, a well-known English historian, once noted, "history is all about context." Sociological studies could make this claim as well, though I should add temporality and populations as well.

My opportunity came from the studies at IHD that were mainly concerned with individual continuities from childhood to the adult years. They also collected data on the larger SES environment of the study members, but they did not analyze it. This individual focus increased the value of what I could bring to the research program in placing lives and development in context.

Just how to achieve this proved to be a real challenge over my professional lifetime. I had much to learn on ways of thinking about lives and on how to study them in relation to developmental and aging processes. But to understand this work, I must turn to its source--the Oakland Growth Study and the data archive I encountered in 1962 that led to *Children of the Great Depression*.

### **The Oakland Growth Study, 1920-1921 N = 170-200**

The Oakland study was designed in large measure to investigate physical growth and development, with data collection starting around 1930-31, just prior to the worst years of the Great Depression. Family interviews were

obtained with the mothers -- 1931, 1934 and 1936. Both self-reports and peer observations were collected frequently across the 1930s. The Study members completed high school in 1938-39, just before Germany invaded Poland and launched the Blitz over England. Adult follow-ups had been carried out in the 1950s. The next follow-up occurred in 1972 (the Intergenerational study, combining all of three studies, the study members and their children). This was followed by a 1982 follow-up.

I arrived at Berkeley during August 1962 and found the Institute of Human Development in a newly completed Tolman Hall. This was just after the 1959 interview (about age 39). Some of the data from the old College Ave. Institute were still in boxes. However my first task was to come up "with a way of thinking about lives and human development over time." Also I needed "a way to link the changing times of the Depression and War" to these lives. Work on this project would provide guidance in constructing a life record codebook, as well as codebooks for the recently completed interviews.

Looking back on these things I realize how little preparation I had for the tasks at hand. For example, all of my graduate training and research experience had focused on survey data at a point in time. Now I faced more than thirty years of life experience and measurements of all kinds across nearly 200 study members. I did not have any training with life history data, whether retrospective or prospective.

And none of my graduate seminars focused on the tradition of life history research, or on what is now called "the life course approach or theory." These deficiencies could be found in just about any major graduate program across the social and behavioral sciences in the early 60s.

The few longitudinal studies that were active around 1960 did not establish a pressing need for theories and methods appropriate to this kind of design. But the scarcity of these studies changed radically by the 1970s, with the launching of the National Longitudinal Surveys, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and countless small-scale projects in the U.S. and abroad. By the end of the 1970s, the Social Science Research Council was sponsoring groups with a longitudinal focus, such as the committee on human development and the life course. This committee funded the development of an inventory of longitudinal studies in this country and abroad.

In view of this "lack of preparation," how did I proceed? What did I piece together to provide a perspective on "lives in changing times?" I could mention a number of influences, but I shall restrict my comments to three. First, the Chicago Committee on Human Development, featuring Bernice Neugarten and many other luminaries. A second influence is that of population studies which often thought of birth year in terms of a birth cohort. Sociologist Hal Wilensky at Berkeley and his wondrous codebook on the Detroit Labor-Leisure Study became a third important influence.

Even during graduate work at UNC, I found much inspiration in the scholarship of the Chicago multidisciplinary committee, and especially in how Bernice Neugarten thought about lives and aging. At IHD I returned to Bernice's early writings on age as I thought about lives and their patterning. This led me to an appreciation of event timing in lives and its variability. Her work also turned my attention to the subjective meanings of age -for example, does the person feel older, younger or about the same as his/her age? I also began to think about age-graded and event-structured lives.

For many decades, social roles and relationships provided a way of thinking about people's lives. However they had a timeless quality -such as the Adams' family generations and the parental role. This "timelessness" did not exist when roles were linked to age or time, as through the research of Neugarten.

In addition to the timing and timetables of peoples' lives, I owe demographers much because they gave me a way of locating people in historical time -through their birth year, in particular. In 1965 Norman Ryder authored a thoughtful essay on such cohorts in the study of social change. Matilda Riley also wrote about cohorts and ways of aging about this time.

Lastly, Hal Wilensky's codebook on a Detroit study gave me valuable insights on how to think about the multiple pathways of people and their interplay over time - especially work and family. Wilensky viewed these pathways as intersecting life cycles. His richly detailed codebook provided one approach to moving from single to multiple

careers and their interaction.

Neugarten, Ryder and Wilensky, then, all contributed importantly to my attempt to place human development and lives in context, but this conceptualization was little more than a skeletal framework when I began working on a life record codebook of events and life transitions, and started coding the uncoded data sets and interviews. Later on, longitudinal data analysis became an important issue for me and my mentors were many, both at IHD (Jack Block, Norm Livson, etc.) and at UNC-Chapel Hill.

In the course of archival exploration, I discovered a number of important features of the Oakland Data Archive. For example:

1- An eclectic or comprehensive design guided the pre-adult data collection in the Oakland Growth Study, including a large amount of information on the socioeconomic attributes of the families that had not been used when I started working with the data archive.

This scope of data collection makes a longitudinal data archive useful in many ways across the decades, especially when the data are both qualitative and quantitative. *Children of the Great Depression* is certainly one product of this usefulness. The richness of the data archive enabled me to pursue questions that the original study was not designed to investigate. I could recode or recast the data sets to produce the essential measurements. I was then able to compare Study members from relatively deprived and nondeprived families within the pre-Depression middle and working class.

2- Evidence of family change. The Oakland families seemed to be in almost constant motion as they responded to the events and pressures of the Great Depression. I soon realized that I had to abandon a static SES approach to families and their division of labor.

When I started working on *Children of the Great Depression* I viewed this "dynamic" as a family economy in which resources and tasks are allocated over time. Hard times were expressed in part through change in this economy - for example, with children and mothers assuming employment roles, etc.

Longitudinal studies today have enabled us to view family structure as an evolving process -mother only families may become two parent families and then father-only families. The type of sequence makes a difference in the lives of children.

3- The advantages of qualitative and quantitative data in longitudinal studies. Especially during the adult years of the Oakland Ss, qualitative data offered me a chance for producing recodes that could address the questions I posed in *Children of the Great Depression*.

We typically approach a longitudinal data set with questions or a research problem. Then we discover that we must modify the problem to fit the data, or recast the data to fit the research problem. I have employed both options in my work with the Oakland Growth data archive and with other longitudinal data sets as well.

4- The importance of a life record file, one that depicts key age-graded events and statuses of the Study members, such as age at leaving home and school, age at entering the military and college, etc. This information was not initially available on the Oakland study members. I had to literally comb through the qualitative and quantitative data to obtain it. For example, this was the only way I could determine the military record of the Study men - whether they served and in what branch and theatre, etc.

5- The Oakland data archive enabled me to view human development and aging as life-long processes. Today this perspective has gained much support in the field of aging. We recognize that we cannot study aging without taking into account early life trajectories. By starting with adolescents, the Oakland study is responsive to this "whole life course" approach. This is also the case with the Berkeley Guidance and Growth samples, 1928-29, that were studied from early childhood into late life.

The Oakland Growth Study provided data for my first attempt to investigate the life course and human development in changing times. Overall, both men and women from deprived families in this Study fared well in

their lives, when compared to the more privileged nondeprived. But why? Some were no doubt influenced in some way by WW II, though I did not know how. Moreover, the generalizability of this single cohort could not be determined. Were the Depression's influences less or more severe in the Oakland cohort, when compared to younger or older Californians?

To address this question, I returned to IHD for a year of coding and recoding on the Berkeley Guidance sample (1971-1972), a younger cohort of men and women who were born in 1928-1929. By this time, I had achieved greater understanding of the link between "social paths and ways of development." This led me to investigate WW II as well as the Depression in the lives of this younger cohort. In doing so I gradually refined a method for "working with archival data" that eventually became a small monograph with this title.

### **World War II in Lives**

My initial neglect of WW II in the lives of the Oakland Study reminds me of a Stanford professor's gifted sample, born before 1922. I am referring, of course, to Lewis Terman. Professor Terman was not particularly interested in the changing historical world of his sample, though his Study members were -they were living it, a good many in foxholes on the front lines. In Terman's 1950 survey, the men wrote notes to him all over the margins, expressing their dismay that no questions dealt with their wartime experiences!!

The general resilience of Depression children from the Oakland Study prompted more thought about the potential influence of WW II for survivors through the GI Bill and other experiences. Ninety percent of the Oakland men went into the military. These issues also led me to do a more exhaustive search for military experiences among the Berkeley Guidance men and women as I coded their life histories. To supplement these data, I eventually mounted a military survey of all surviving members of the Oakland and Berkeley samples.

The Oakland and Berkeley Study members were born at opposite ends of the 1920s, but their data archives had enough similarities to support a comparative analysis of the two birth cohorts, 1920-1921 and 1928-1929. Before the Great Depression, the director of the Berkeley Guidance project, Jean MacFarlane, planned a matched experimental-control design, but it did not survive the incessant pressures of the economic collapse. As in the Oakland Growth study project, we assembled life record information (a chronology of events and activities in different areas of life -marriage, work, etc.) and the data were then subjected to systematic coding and recoding, along with the adult interviews.

The Berkeley cohort encountered hardtimes at a much younger age than the Oakland cohort, and I expected this group to be more adversely affected by the Depression. This turned out to be the case for males, in particular, across the adolescent years. As teenagers, these boys were less apt to be hopeful, self-directed, and confident about their futures, when compared to youth who were spared such hardship. However, between adolescence and mid-life, the men from deprived families achieved significant developmental gains in self-esteem and assertiveness, though not sufficient to erase completely the inadequacies of the early years.

Shortly after I arrived at IHD, the Berkeley Guidance staff commented on the apparent turnaround in the lives of a good many males, including an anecdotal essay by Jean MacFarlane. Their explanation centered largely on intrapsychic changes and interpersonal experiences. However, the life success of the Oakland males and the young adult development of the Berkeley males directed my attention to the impact of military service. Nearly three out of four Berkeley men served in the military, typically at the end of WW II and into the postwar years.

Berkeley men from deprived families tended to enter the service at a younger age than the nondeprived, and those who did were most likely to become more competent socially and accomplished in their careers by age 40. Do we find other evidence of this "early entry" advantage? Few longitudinal studies were launched before WW II, as we know, but a Boston study of the same age cohort as the Berkeley sample has provided a compelling replication of our finding. In addition, the accomplishments of the Oakland veterans from deprived families may also have much to do with WW II, especially through the GI Bill.

What about the lives of women in these studies? Oakland and Berkeley women from deprived families benefitted from employment in the booming wartime and postwar economy, from access to college, and from marriage,

typically to men who served in WW II and/or Korea. Only a few women served in the military. Times of economic depression and war became an important part of the life story of men and women from these longitudinal studies.

### **The Life Course in Changing Times: Some Reflections**

Albert Bandura has written eloquently about the chance encounters that open and close doors that give shape to our lives. But my encounter with the IHD longitudinal studies was less a chance event than the expression of a professional network -my graduate school mentor obtained his doctorate at the University of Chicago along with a close friend by the name of John Clausen. When John accepted the directorship of IHD, I was proposed as a new (very green) Ph.D. who could assist him in working with the Oakland Growth Study. This was surely optimistic thinking, but the transition to IHD in the early 1960s was a turning point of great significance for me. I embarked on a postgraduate project that continues to this day.

No one with my graduate studies background could hope for a more stimulating and challenging setting than the one I entered in the 1960s. Three pioneering longitudinal studies were located here, and most of the research paid little attention to the social pathways of the Study members and to the historical forces that were making a difference in their families, life course, and development. I was prepared by training to contribute a contextual perspective to this work, but I had no inkling of what lay ahead -the linking of hardtimes and wartimes to lives. And eventually a career of longitudinal studies that focused on the life course of human development and aging.

Thank you