Talkin' 'Bout My Generation': Perceptions of Generational Belonging Among the 1958 Cohort

by Jane Elliott
Institute of Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the meaning of the concept of generational identity for a specific cohort of individuals born in Britain in the late 1950s – now in their fifties. It draws on qualitative biographical interviews that have been carried out with a subsample of 170 members of the 1958 British Birth Cohort Study. These interviews included questions about cohort members' sense of identity and specifically asked 'Do you think of yourself as belonging to a particular generation?' Cohort members' understandings of the multi-faceted concept of 'generation' are explored and the strategies that individuals used to answer this question are discussed. Although they were born at a time of continued high fertility in Britain, following the Second World War, it is clear that this cohort do not see themselves as properly part of the 'baby boom'. Analysis suggests that this group derive a sense of generational location more from cultural than from structural factors, or from historical/political events. Indeed the majority of them do not have a strong generational identity and might be thought of as a 'passive generation'.

Keywords: 1958, Cohort, Generation, Identity, Baby Boomers

Introduction

1.1 Interest in the concept of generation is profoundly sociological, in that it encapsulates 'the interaction between historical resources, contingent circumstances, and social formation' (Turner 2002: 16). This has led some authors to suggest that – with the fragmentation of social class as a key feature of the social structure – generational consciousness has emerged as an alternative form of social or political consciousness (Turner 2002). Generations and age have been argued to have become potent social classifications replacing the old 'antagonistic strata e.g. classes' that formerly divided societies (Corsten 1999). Indeed, research demonstrating profound economic inequalities between generations has been used by some authors to argue that major tensions and conflicts could emerge between generations in the 21st century (Chauvel 2006; Willetts 2010; Howker & Malik 2010). This paper therefore examines whether there is indeed evidence of a strong generational identity among a sample of British adults interviewed in mid-life and whether those who feel they belong to a generation express this in terms of structural differences and inequalities between their own generation and other generational groups.

1.2 The idea that a group of individuals born at the same time, or a 'cohort', may develop a sense of collective identity based on the period in which they reached maturity, raises questions about whether all cohorts are equally likely to develop a generational identity or whether some cohorts are more distinctive than others in terms of the historical events and structural context that they have experienced. For example, Vincent argues that 'we can establish the reality of the "War Generation" as self-aware, recognized by others and still clearly having an impact on the rest of society' (Vincent 2005: 590). There are numerous books and articles that discuss the lives of the 'Baby Boomers', and there has also been attention to 'Generation X' (born between 1965 and 1976), who are often defined as the children of the baby boomer generation and sometimes known as the 'busters' or the Thirteenth Generation (Coupland 1991; Williams et al. 1997; Phillipson et al. 2008). However there are other generations who are not so readily identifiable and have not been named in the same way. Turner (2002) argues that a useful distinction can be made between active and passive generations. He states that 'social change may be brought about by the contingently available strategic advantages of a generational cohort plus the consolidation of moral or hegemonic leadership...The strategic impact of a self conscious generational

cohort provides a dividing line between passive (in itself) generations and active or strategic (for-itself) generations' (Turner 2002: 13–14). The existence of high-profile or 'active' generations could potentially provide other generational groups, with 'designated others' or points of comparison for the discursive construction of a generational location.

1.3 Sociological interest in the concept of generation and generational identity, together with the increased use of the life course approach in cross-cohort empirical analyses (Elder & Pellerin 1998; Gregg & Tominey 2005), underlines the importance of the concept of historical generations for academic researchers. However, it is less clear whether individuals themselves identify as being part of a historical generation, or 'cohort', and have an appreciation of how their experiences and life chances may have been shaped by a historically specific structural context. There are two linked questions here. First whether individuals perceive their lives to have been fundamentally shaped by socio-structural circumstances in early life, and, second, how important this perception might be for informing their sense of having a collective identity and being different from, or even in conflict with other generations. The purpose of this paper is to explore the generational identities of a group of individuals all born in early 1958 by conducting a descriptive empirical analysis of individuals' responses to questions about generational belonging. The sample, which is described in more detail below, forms part of the 1958 British Birth Cohort study (also known as the National Child Development Study (NCDS)).

1.4 Understanding the identities of the cohort born in 1958 is of particular relevance to the debates outlined here because, as will be discussed in more detail below, they were born a decade after the main post-war baby boom cohort, but significantly before the decade belonging to Generation X. This raises the question whether those born in the late 1950s identify with the baby boomers or whether they situate themselves as belonging to a distinctively different generational group. In addition, the qualitative material presented here provides a rare opportunity to investigate empirically whether this cohort feels itself to have any kind of generational identity, and indeed how the term generation is understood by individuals who are not themselves social scientists.

Historical generations and generations as kinship relations

1.5 Since Mannheim's influential work on the concept of generation (Mannheim 1952), the importance of timing as a key factor shaping a collective generational identity has repeatedly been stressed by researchers with an interest in the sociological concept of generation (Corsten 1999; McMullin et al. 2007). For example, Pilcher (1994) notes that it is events and circumstances experienced when individuals are 'coming of age' that are most salient for the formation of generational consciousness, while Vincent (2005) argues that experiences and exposures during this time influence the development of 'socio-interpretive maps' that will in turn have an influence on reactions to social phenomena across the life course. However, it is important not to overstate the importance of young adulthood as the site where generational identities are forged. 'Generations share not only their adolescence but also the other phases of life: adulthood, old age...the collective ageing of a generation also means collective learning' (Corsten 1999: 268). As with other aspects of identity, generational identities will be reflexively constructed so that people are continually re-evaluating and re-interpreting the meaning of 'their time' (Alwin & Krosnick 1991; Vincent 2005).

1.6 It has been argued that the concept of generation is important for sociology, but progress can only be made if a single, clear, definition of generation is employed and other usages are abandoned (Ryder 1965; Kertzer 1983; Turner 2002; Biggs 2007). Biggs (2007) distinguishes three main ways in which the term generation is used. First as biological or kinship relation, second as a cohort that experiences the same set of historical conditions, and third with an emphasis on psychological belonging and identity. Kertzer (1983) argues that generation should properly be used only to refer to kinship relations and concludes by lamenting the fact that the term generation 'continues to be employed in a polysemous manner guaranteed to sow confusion.' (1983: 142). However, the focus of this paper is on individuals' varied understandings and articulations of generational belonging, and in the analysis which follows, attention will be drawn to *all three* aspects of the term generation distinguished by Biggs. As highlighted by Higgs et al. (2009) the concepts of 'generational style' or 'generational habitus' (Gilleard & Higgs 2005) can be of utility in understanding individual consciousness and orientation to experiences in their lives.

1.7 In this context, it is also worth highlighting that any specific cohort is likely to include individuals who are in very different structural positions with respect to their kin relations. For example, as can be seen in Table 1 (below), those born in 1958, who form the focus of this paper, can be in one of at least six different generational configurations^[1]. The largest group is those who are in the middle of a three-generational 'biological' family with at least one child and at least one parent still alive. But it can be seen that there is a great deal of heterogeneity within the cohort such that there are three relatively large groups who are either in a four generation family (i.e. with at least one parent still alive and with children and grandchildren) or who are in a two generational family either as the parent or the child.

Table 1: Generational location and kinship relations of the 1958 cohort at age 50

Generational location by gender		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Generational	Single generation	255	219	474

location

	5.4%	4.5%	4.9%
Child of 2 generations	663	585	1248
	14.0%	11.9%	12.9%
Parent of 2 generations	677	757	1434
	14.3%	15.4%	14.9%
Middle of 3 generations	2221	2078	4299
	47.0%	42.2%	44.6%
Grandparent of 3 generations	302	391	693
	6.4%	7.9%	7.2%
Four generations	609	889	1498
	12.9%	18.1%	15.5%
Total	4727	4919	9646
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Author's analysis of data from Sweep 8 of the 1958 British Birth Cohort Study (conducted in 2008 when individuals were aged 50)

Generational identities

1.8 There is a growing literature on individuals' perceptions of their generational identity (Williams et al. 1997; McMullin et al. 2007; Biggs et al. 2008; Gilleard & Higgs 2005, 2007)^[2]. In Britain there has been a focus on the baby boomer generation, with specific attention to the first wave of the post-war baby boom, i.e. those born between 1945 and 1954. This generation has been found to have a relatively youthful orientation – they are reported as valorising youth and seeking to blur the distinction between themselves and subsequent generations, while using older parental generations as a point of comparison and contrast (Biggs et al. 2008). Almost all of those interviewed in the research by Biggs et al. described themselves as feeling younger than their chronological age, and this research highlighted the importance of consumption as a strategy for establishing a successful identity among this generation. Those interviewed also identified themselves with the decade of the 1960s rather than with being in middle-age or as entering the 'third age'. In contrast with the findings of research carried out in Finland (Karisto 2007), Biggs et al. report that the identity of this group (born 1945–54) was more focussed on identification with the decade when they were in their teenage years than with the label of 'baby boomers'.

1.9 In addition to literature on generations that focuses on identity and cultural tastes, there have also recently been a number of popular books which focus on the growing structural and economic *inequalities* between generations (Beckett 2010; Howker & Mailk 2010; Willetts 2010). This could be seen as following from an earlier body of work in the US and elsewhere on generational inequality and potential conflict (Longman 1987; Kotlikoff & Burns 2004; Islam 2007; Chauvel 2006). In the recent books, images of very distinct groups have emerged, which in some accounts are seen as having conflicting and competing interests, particularly in the face of the current economic downturn.

1.10 There are also debates about the parameters that define the baby boomer generation. This is in part due to the different demographic profile of different countries (Phillipson 2007; Phillipson et al. 2008). For example, Finland had a relatively brief increase in birth rates after the war coming to an end in the early fifties; the USA and Australia had a more extended 'baby boom' lasting until the early 1960s and, as discussed further below, Britain experienced two peaks in the birth rate between 1945 and 1966. This means that while many define the 'baby boom' as occurring between 1946 and 1964, others define it more restrictively as occurring in the decade after the second world war (e.g. 1946–1955) giving the baby boom generation a more coherent collective identity as they would all have been teenagers at some point during the 1960s. (cf. Williams et al. 1997; Willetts 2010; US Census Bureau with Beckett 2010; Caren et al. 2011; Bonvalet & Ogg 2008 for the narrower definition).

1.11 This paper aims to gain a clearer understanding of the generational identity of a sample of individuals who are part of the 1958 British Birth Cohort study. All those individuals born in Britain in a single week of March 1958 were included in the original sample. This cohort could therefore be understood as part of the second phase of the baby boom – they were born at a time in which the birth rate was climbing steadily after a trough at the beginning of the 1950s. In 1958 there were a total of 740,715 births in England and Wales (compared with a peak of 881,026 in 1947). The birth rate continued to rise to a peak of 875,972 in 1964 and then steadily declined thereafter (OPCS 1987). For the most part, the parents of the 1958 cohort were born during the late 1920s and the 1930s and would therefore have been children or adolescents during the Second World War. This means that the parents of the 1958 cohort can clearly be identified as belonging to the 'War generation' (Rogler 2002; Vincent 2005).

1.12 Members of the 1958 cohort attended primary school during the 1960s, a decade of relative optimism and affluence which also witnessed an explosion of popular culture and the 'permissive moment'. The end of the decade can be characterised by the liberalisation of legislation on homosexuality, divorce and abortion and the reduction of the age of majority from 21 to 18 (Weeks 1981; Elliott 1991). Those born in 1958 began to enter the labour market from the mid 1970s onwards – when the unemployment rate was rapidly increasing. This cohort faced severely deteriorating labour market conditions over the whole of

their twenties. Their experiences therefore contrast markedly with those born just 12 years earlier in 1946, who typically entered the labour market when British unemployment rates were low. [3] This might lead us to expect evidence of resentment among those born in 1958 when comparing themselves with earlier generations (Willett 2010).

1.13 This cohort therefore occupies an ambiguous generational location. They are part of the broader definition of baby boomers discussed above, but are all too literally 'children of the sixties' – so that they would have been too young to go to Woodstock or to take part in the student protests of 1968. They also did not benefit from the buoyant labour market conditions of the 1960s that greeted those born in Britain at the beginning of the post-war baby boom. The aim of this paper is therefore to explore how members of this cohort understand their generational identity. Do they consider themselves as products of the baby boom? How far might they identify with the iconic decade of the 1960s? Indeed, do they feel part of a recognisable generation at all or is this only a marginal element of their expressed identity?

Sources of data: The 1958 British Birth Cohort study and the qualitative sub-study

2.1 The 1958 British Birth Cohort is one of Britain's four national birth cohort studies – it originated in the Perinatal Mortality Survey, which studied over 17,000 births in 1958. Since then, eight main sweeps have been carried out: when the respondents were age 7 (1965), 11 (1969), 16 (1974), 23 (1981), 33 (1991), 41–42 (1999–2000), 46 (2004) and 50 (2008). Further details of the study are available from the Centre for Longitudinal Studies website (www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/ncds). This paper draws on research from the ESRC-funded project 'Social participation and identities', which, for the first time, allowed for qualitative biographical interviews to be conducted with a substantial sub-sample of 170 of the main 1958 birth cohort study (Elliott et al. 2010). Individuals were all aged fifty or fifty-one at the time of the interviews in 2008 and 2009. The semi-structured interviews covered six key topics: (a) neighbourhood and belonging; (b) cultural participation; (c) friendships and family ties; (d) life stories; (e) identities; and (f) experiences of being in the study. A copy of the topic guide which guided the interviews is included as Appendix 1, each interview lasted approximately ninety minutes. This paper focuses on the section 'identities' and in particular on the question 'Do you think of yourself as belonging to a particular generation?' The placing of this question, posed after respondents had been asked to reflect on their lives and provide a life story, could be expected to sensitise individuals to their historical or generational location.

2.2 The interviews were all conducted in respondents' own homes by trained qualitative interviewers who were of a similar age to the interviewees themselves (i.e. interviewers were aged between 38 and 58). There were seven interviewers in all, and each conducted between 19 and 34 interviews. A total of 238 individuals were invited to take part in the initial study and 170 interviews were completed. Before the interview, individuals were given an information sheet and consent form which made it explicit that the interviews could potentially be used both for research and teaching. Further details of the methodology and a precise description of the sample are provided in a CLS working paper that documents development of the topic guide and sampling in detail (Elliott et al. 2010). The interview transcripts have all been anonymised and are available to researchers from the UK Data Service (<http://ukdataservice.ac.uk/> - Study Number 6691 - DOI: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-6691-2).

2.3 The research design means that the sample of qualitative interviews is heterogeneous in terms of social background and geographical location. Of particular salience for the current paper, individuals are linked by their birth date – all were born in a single week of 1958. However, as has been shown above, the generational location of individuals within their extended families is very varied. It is also worth noting that slightly more than 80 per cent of those interviewed had had children and while 76 per cent were married, a further 6 per cent were cohabiting with only 18 per cent living without a partner. There were 84 women and 86 men. The group who were interviewed therefore largely reflects the profile of the members of the 1958 cohort study as a whole. The sub-sample was slightly biased towards more educated respondents, with approximately a half with qualifications at NVQ level 4 and above but also included 15 per cent with no qualifications or qualifications at only NVQ level 1, and 24 per cent in manual occupations (Elliott et al. 2010). These qualitative interviews together with the structured longitudinal data collected from the whole cohort over the past fifty years therefore provide an unprecedented data resource that can provide insights into the lives, experiences and identities of a specific generation.

2.4 The qualitative interviews form a unique data resource in being linked to existing longitudinal quantitative data, and it is somewhat unusual to have such a large sample of qualitative interviews (170). This means that it has been possible to provide some descriptive figures and percentages in the text to help indicate the frequency with which certain themes emerged in the interviews. In the results section which follows, each quotation is labelled with the unique id number of the interview and with some very brief demographic information about the individual, namely gender, job title, residential location, marital status and number of children.

Results: Do the 1958 cohort have a clear generational identity?

3.1 In response to the question 'Do you consider yourself as belonging to a specific generation?' just under a half of the sample (78, i.e. 46 per cent) stated that they did. A further 67 (39 per cent) stated that they *didn't* belong to a generation, and 24 (14 per cent) gave an equivocal or *mixed* response – in many cases starting by saying that they didn't belong to a generation, but then reflecting that they *did* feel part of a specific generational group. The following section describes how these three groups talk about the concept of a generation and about their own generational identity. The paper then turns to an exploration of the ways in which the respondents used their location as parents or children in their discussion of generational belonging. Although the sample is of modest size (170 in all) it is also possible to analyse whether responses are patterned in terms of variables such as gender and qualifications. Initial descriptive analysis showed that there was very little difference between men and women or between

different social class groups in terms of the proportion of cohort members who stated that they belonged to a particular generation. The focus in the discussion that follows is therefore on the key themes that emerged in the responses across the whole sample.

Cohort members with a clear generational identity

Decades and music

3.2 Among those who stated that they felt they belonged to a specific generation the dominant themes which emerged were firstly belonging to a decade (e.g. the 1960s; 1970s; 1980s) and secondly preferences for particular types of music. To quantify this, of the 78 cohort members who said they belonged to a generation, 42 mentioned at least one specific decade and, of these, 31 talked about the 1970s, while 23 of this total group of 78 talked about generational belonging in terms of musical preferences. As will be shown below, these were frequently linked. Two further, but less dominant, themes were computers and technology and changes in manners and social expectations. The themes of computers and technology and manners or social expectations occurred less frequently than the themes of music and decades (with 14 cohort members and 12 cohort members respectively including them in their answers about generational belonging).

3.3 In answer to the question about generational identity, many cohort members immediately situated themselves in terms of the decades of the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s, with the 1970s being mentioned most frequently. For example:

I suppose just the generation from the 70s I suppose, growing up. To us it's the '70s, that's the era, you know, that was my years, '70s when you--, you're a teenager and then you find your own way or whatever. So I think the '70s, you know, generation I am. (P372: female, South East, Home help, married with 1 child)

and

Yeah, I think, really I think definitely I'm a child of the '60s, you know, and a teenager of the 70s, and I had my children in the '80s. Definitely there's a structure to that, you know. (P440: male, Managing Director, North West, married with 3 children)

3.4 This second quotation is noteworthy because it was relatively rare for respondents to map their different life stages to the different decades, instead many cohort members explicitly identified themselves with the decade of the 1970s because it was the time when they were teenagers, as one put it 'cause the '70s was my era' or as another said '70s was my time'.

3.5 This sense of belonging to the 1970s was frequently linked to the music of that time. For example:

Seventies. That was my era, the '70s, but that's about it really. Just Abba, 10cc, just relate it all into that, so you know when you were just in your teens and the music and that side of things. (P302: female, part-time civil service, North West, married with two children)

3.6 This generational affinity with the 1970s is congruent with previous research on memory and the life course which suggests that it is events which take place in the late teens and early twenties that are particularly salient for shaping attitudes and values and might therefore be seen as contributing to a generational identity (Schuman & Scott 1989; Griffin 2004). What is also of note here however is that, in these responses, the 1970s are linked with music and youth culture rather than with other historical markers such as the three day week, power cuts, the winter of discontent, or an increase in the unemployment rate. As discussed above, recent publications on generational inequality have focussed on the political and economic conditions that have shaped the experiences of different cohorts since the end of the Second World War (Willetts 2010; Becket 2010). However, for this group, even for those who express a clear sense of generational belonging, the emphasis is on a cultural identity shaped during their teenage years and linked to popular music and fashion. There is no sense of antagonism towards earlier generations, and very few individuals made any reference to historical events that had occurred during their youth or later adult life.

Computers, technology and social change

3.7 Computers and technology were raised by a number of cohort members as defining the distinction between different generations. As the very different quotations below illustrate, while some cohort members spoke about feeling marginalised by the new technology, others linked developments in technology with progress and affluence:

I was brought up before the computer generation, you know, and you put me on a computer now and I'm useless, you know, I'm the one finger type thing (P046: male, Firefighter, North West, married with 2 children)
We didn't have videos and we didn't have--, like we had a brown telly with a wee tiny screen like that. And I said this would have been totally amazing. Like you would have thought we were the richest people in the world, to walk in here. (P238: female, Scotland, Sales rep,

married with 3 children)

3.8 The way that talk of computers and technology is used by the 1958 cohort to help define their generational location is rather different from the way that computers and technology are discussed by younger generations (Williams et al. 1997; McMullin et al. 2007). In the current research, computers were frequently mentioned in *generic* terms and often in relation to work rather than leisure. In contrast to this, McMullin et al. define those born between 1955 and 1963 as the 'ATARI' generation because they came of age as ATARI Video games became popular. However given that the first ATARI home video game was not released until October 1977 when this cohort was already aged 19, they would have had little potential for exposure to new technology in the home in adolescence. While later generations may align themselves with specific games or consoles, e.g. the 'Game Boy' generation, the Xbox generation, or the Pac Man generation, for this cohort the rapid changes in computer technology and games consoles did not emerge until they were well into adulthood.

3.9 Many who felt part of a distinct generation stressed a different facet of social change – changes in values, attitudes and manners. Common themes included lack of respect for authority with children being brought up less strictly; a decline in the work ethic and more waste and materialism; lack of community and family ties, and a growth in complexity. For example:

I'm from the last generation that we seemed to be brought up to do as you were told and had to do it, whereas it seems to have all got very lax...Children seem to have far more input into what they do and say, manners don't matter the same (P1094: Female, receptionist, North West, married and no children)

This view that parenting practices have changed over time also chimes with the consensus around the importance of 'not interfering' which emerged in interviews with a slightly older generation of grandparents (with a median age of 65) interviewed by Jennifer Mason and colleagues (Mason et al. 2007).

On not being a 'Baby Boomer' or part of the 'War generation'

3.10 As highlighted above, a large minority of cohort members (67, i.e. forty per cent) said that they did *not* feel they belonged to a specific generation. A few gave very brief and unequivocal responses, however, the majority of cohort members gave more elaborated responses, and these fell into two main categories. First, those who acknowledged the existence of generations, but said that they didn't fit into a definable generation. Second those who elided generation and life stage and responded by talking about the ageing process, or explained that they socialise with people of all different ages and therefore do not feel a clear affinity with a specific generational group. As highlighted above, it is noteworthy that there were no clear gender differences or social class differences in the proportions of individuals who stated that they did or did not have a social class identity. For example among the 86 men, 38 had a generational identity, 34 did not and 13 gave more mixed responses, while the figures for the 84 women were 40, 33 and 11 respectively.

3.11 In common with those who *did* have a generational identity, several individuals responded by talking about specific decades (e.g. the 1960s), *but explained that they were not part of that generation*. For example, individuals made statements such as 'the 60s generation, if you like, was happening perhaps a bit too early for me' (P606); or 'I'm not a child of the 60s...I kind of was too young for all that' (P010). Other respondents talked about being too young to be a 'baby boomer' and also not being part of the 'war generation'. In total there were twelve cohort members who used the terms 'baby boomer' or 'baby boom', and in all but one case explained that this was *not* their generation. For example:

'Whereas people say oh we're from the baby boom, we're from the war, whatever, no I just was born in 1958. It wasn't necessarily a generation' (P130: female, Designer South East, Married with 1 child)

3.12 These responses suggest that while many interviewees recognised the existence of identifiable generations, they could not readily locate their own cohort within the generational identities that are currently available. In two cases individuals described this as not having a generational identity or being part of a 'lost generation' (P675 and P711). These responses directly contradict a very small number of cohort members who actively identified with the 1960s, despite their relative youth. There was therefore some heterogeneity in the way that interviewees identified with different decades, however the dominant theme here was for cohort members to dissociate themselves from the decade of the 1960s or the generation of baby boomers. This is somewhat reminiscent of debates about dis-identification, and in particular Skeggs' influential work based on her ethnographic interviews with young working class women (Skeggs 1997). Although there are some similarities here between the 'structuring absence' provided by a working class identity in Skeggs interviews and the baby boomer identity in these interviews, it is important to stress some key differences. Whereas Skeggs writes about how the young women she interviewed 'made enormous efforts to distance themselves from the label of working class' (Skeggs 1997: 74) in contrast, in the responses about generational identity, individuals seemed keen to display their knowledge by using the term baby boomer and to signal their competence in understanding the boundaries between different generational groups. Linked to this it is noteworthy that of the twelve individuals who used the term 'baby boomer' eleven were in non-manual occupations (and ten of these were in professional or managerial occupations). All eleven were clear that they were not part of the real baby boom. As a male university lecturer explained :

I mean, I get a bit--, you get all this kind of popular press stuff about baby boomers but when you look at what they mean, it's such a huge kind of swathe of people ... it's such an

elastic kind of term that I don't like kind of using it. (P064: male, Lecturer and editor, South East, married and no children)

3.13 The one case who did at least partially identify as a member of the baby boomer generation was from much lower in the class hierarchy (a carer), she hesitantly said:

Well I suppose if I think about it it's the baby boomer generation, whatever that's supposed to mean. Well, from the--, after the war, wasn't it. But not from my outlook on life I don't see myself as belonging to a particular generation, no. (P729: female, Carer, married with 2 children)

3.14 A second key theme that emerged in the responses of those who said they did not have a generational identity was the elision of generation and age, 'through a *denial* of feeling old'. Several individuals in this group said that they still feel young inside even though they recognise that their body is ageing. For example:

I don't know, because in some ways I feel old, physically, aches and pains and things, but I still feel like I did when I was 40 and I have to remind myself every now and again that I can't go out dressed like I'm 40, I'm actually 50 and I can't physically do what I could do and I find that very frustrating. (P441: female, Administrator, South East, married two children)

3.15 There are clearly echoes of the research by Biggs et al. here, who also found that their interviewees perceived themselves to be on average ten years younger than their chronological age (Biggs et al. 2008). This lay conception of generation as indicating that portion of identity that is closely linked to age or life stage is also consonant with recent work by Biggs and Lowenstein on 'generational intelligence' or the 'generational imagination' (Biggs & Lowenstein 2011).

3.16 Allied to this, many of the cohort members who said that they didn't feel part of a specific generation elaborated their answer by explaining that they have got friends who are both older and younger than they are, or that '(I) don't socialise with my own age group, I socialise with every age group' (P075) or 'in a group of people I can--, I can talk to people that are much older and people who are much younger without any difficulty whatsoever' (P178). In total, 14 out of the 67 individuals who did not feel they belonged to a generation explained this was because they socialise with people of all ages. This refusal to claim a definitive identity or to be put in a specific category is somewhat reminiscent of the propensity of respondents to proclaim themselves normal or ordinary and refuse social class identities, and may reflect a comparable reluctance to be defined by the social sciences or experts (Savage et al. 2001; Savage 2005).

Cohort members who give a mixed or ambiguous response

3.17 There were 24 cohort members (14 per cent of the total) who gave a more ambiguous response to the question about generational identity. In common with those who expressed a clear generational identity, several of these cohort members talked about the 1970s and about liking music from the past and used this to indicate a provisional generational identity, but were less clear that they really felt that they belonged to a specific generation. For example:

I was born in '58 as you know, so I suppose you sort of pigeon yourself in that generation, so from a music perspective, like sort of '70s and '80s music really, 'cause that's what you remember the most, so that's probably what I'd say. But again, not really, it's just a journey. (P367: male, Senior Management Accountant, South East, married with 2 children)

3.18 Many from this group also explored the issue of ageing, but did not think of this in terms of membership of a generation. For example:

By generation, if you mean like you're getting older but I wouldn't associate myself with one particular group, it's just basically gradually getting older. But I mean a lot of friends are about, you know, ten years younger, friends the same age and I've got friends ten years older, so it's not a restrictive age thing, it's just as you're getting older you realise you're getting older. (P052: male, Housing Adviser, South East, single no children)

3.19 There was therefore considerable overlap in the themes within the responses of those who felt they belonged to a specific generation, those who had very little generational identity and those who gave a more equivocal response. Those who expressed a sense of generational belonging tended to talk about being part of a *historical* generation through their affinity with the 1970s and thereby linked their own biography with their location in historical time. They tended *not* to talk about generation in terms of the ageing process. Rather it is those who are more equivocal about, or who refuse, a generational identity who elide the concept of generation with life stage or ageing. What is also striking is that in answer to this explicit question about generational identity very few cohort members talked about structural factors – they did not explore how their experiences of the education system or the labour market were very different from those of young people today. Use of the word 'generation' within the interview seems rather to have elicited responses couched in terms of popular culture, the periodisation of the past into decades, and familiar tropes about the loss of community and the bad manners of the young. There is therefore no evidence in these responses of potential generational conflicts predicted by Chauvel (2006) and Willetts (2010).

Parents and children – generation as kinship?

3.20 A total of 59 cohort members (35 per cent of the sample) talked about their parents and/or their children in relation to the question about generational identity. These references to parents and children support the suggestion that awareness of kinship relations is an important facet of the concept of generation (Kertzer 1983). A small number of respondents simply stated that because they had children they were clearly part of a specific generation or that they considered themselves to be the generation between their parents and their children. For example:

Probably I look at myself and my mother's generation and I look at my son's generation, I know there's a generation in between that as well, but that's where I probably look, you know, I see myself in my generation, those that are born in the, you know, the mid-'50s to mid-'60s, you know, it's my generation. I look at my mammy's, you know, she's the '20s, and I look at [Son] he's the '80s, so that always gives a good comparison. (P247: female, Police Constable, Scotland, widowed with 1 child)

3.21 For these cohort members, the concept of generation includes their location within a set of kin relations. However for P247, quoted above, there is also a link to the notion of historical generation, or cohort, with the generations of her family clearly linked to decades of the twentieth century. These responses could be considered relatively 'empty' answers, i.e. the individual agrees that he or she belongs to a specific generation, but this perhaps does not really amount to a generational *identity*.

3.22 Other cohort members explained that it is only recently, because their parents have died, that they begin to see themselves as part of the older generation:

for a long time I didn't see differences in ages quite so much, but ...hmmm, ... and I don't know that's anything to do with it, but when my father died, my mother and my aunt, my elders dying, and now we're the older ones, you kind of get a feeling that 'wow'. (P217: male, proprietor, Scotland, Divorced and now cohabiting – no children)

3.23 In contrast to this, but arguably sharing the same idea that it is kinship relations that define a generation, some cohort members stated that they were not really part of a generation because they had become parents later in life than their peers:

I don't, I don't, maybe because I'm an older mum and I'm married to an older husband, so, and my parents were older. So I don't see myself as, you know, so I listen to the boys' music but I can also tune into my husband's music and my dad's music and, you know. (P178: female, Senior Accountant, Scotland, married with 2 children)

This brief interview extract combines the idea that having children late dislocates you from a specific generational position with another, more common, theme – namely that respondents did not feel like a distinct generation because they shared the same taste as, their children. While one cohort member simply stated:

'there's music that my daughter and I can listen to and both like' (P082: female, Family Court Adviser, South East, Divorced with one child)

Another made a more elaborated point that echoed the views of many:

the music, the socialising, it hasn't changed in the last 30 years really. My son who's 16 is listening to music that I enjoyed, you know, and so I think that... there used to be big gaps in generation just because people got older and thought differently in each different generation and I think the cut off is probably the people who were born from the mid '50s upwards really 'cause I think when you get to the low '50s and the '40s, the music was different, the way they were brought up was different and--, but I think sort of late '50s to '60s onwards, I think everyone thinks the same and I--, I don't think that generations are so different anymore. (P439: male, Office Manager, North West, married with 2 children)

3.24 Whereas these respondents stressed their similarity to their children, a few made reference to their children in order to stress their distinction from the younger generation. Improvements in technology and changes in education were other social changes that served to underline generational differences:

And when you've got children, you can see that there's quite big changes, you know, your children have different things to deal with, different--, you know, there's all sorts of technological advances and all sorts of changes in the way that people think about things and that marks them out as being slightly different to you (P438: female, Cook, South East, married with 4 children)

3.25 A very few cohort members talked specifically about their active role in creating new opportunities for their children and used this to distinguish themselves from the next generation.

Generation, hmmm, I suppose I do really in light of my daughter. I think we're women who tried to impress on our ... our daughters, a sense of that you could work and still have your children. That you could actually have a relationship but not necessarily lose yourself in it and that you could be independent and a viable human being, irrespective of a man really. (P031: female, Nursery Nurse, North West, divorced with 2 children)

This extract signals a generational identity which includes parenthood as a mechanism for effecting social change and suggests that this cohort member sees herself as part of an active generation. This individual stands out however as being distinct from the majority of interviewees: the responses that cohort members gave which included discussion of their children or their role as parents, once again, focussed largely on cultural tastes such as fashion and music with only a very few individuals mentioning structural issues such as education or technological changes.

3.26 As discussed above, many cohort members defined their generation in rather negative terms, i.e. in distinction to other generations who are understood to have a clearer generational identity. The theme of the difference between the 1958 generation and the 'war generation' was often expressed by cohort members in relation to their parents. For example:

The previous generation there's sort of a cusp there, but my parents were born just before the war, hmmm, and we--, people that have--, people of my age and younger have no direct memory of that kind of conflict that those--, (P149: male, Financial Adviser, South East, divorced with 3 children)

Our era is probably the first of the younger generation. I know my dad's--, my mum and dad's--, when they were born they had to give all their wages to their mums and dads and things were not the same as--, as what they are now. Basically it's a very easy life that people have now compared to what it was like during the war and in the olden days. So, as I say I was born in '58, I mean from what I remember growing up, you know, everything was--, it was all fine, it was okay. There was never rations or anything like that. (P268: male, General Operative, North West, divorced with 2 children)

3.27 Both of these extracts are also suggestive of a qualitative break between the parental generation or war generation and more recent generations. Whereas interviewee P149 states 'there's a sort of cusp there' interviewee P268 aligns his/her generation as 'the first of the younger generation'. This idea that there is now less of a difference between generations is consonant with the way that cohort members talked about the lack of difference between themselves and their children. Linked to this was the theme that parents constituted a different generation with a different outlook on life and different values. Cohort members described their parents as being part of a generation that was 'one of the last generations to really bring children up properly maybe' (P721) or 'had an intense attachment to having shoes well shined all the time' (P173). This therefore chimes with the research carried out by Biggs et al. (2008) on those born in the first part of the baby boom, discussed above, i.e. those born after the war tend to blur distinctions between themselves and younger generations, but see a major social and cultural shift between themselves and their parent's generation.

3.28 Once again therefore there is no evidence of major tensions or conflicts expressed between the generation born in the late 1950s and earlier or later generations. Only two cohort members specifically talked about more structural issues in relation to generational identity and their parents. While one stressed the improvements in the education system and the opportunities she had in comparison with her parents in stark contrast P435 stated:

I mean you had the baby boomers coming after the war. I just feel as though timing wise, it hasn't been a good--, I think my parents had the opportunity to ... buy houses very cheap and have been able to exploit that but I've found that we've always been shackled with bloody great mortgages here and getting rid of them has been a problem. I just think timing wise, I feel as though it's not been great. (P435: male, accountant, South East, married and 3 children)

This was a very rare example of an individual who felt that belonging to a particular generation carried with it material advantages or disadvantages. Indeed it was the sole example that could be identified within the interviews. As discussed above, generational belonging was much more likely to be associated with a taste in a particular type of music or a loose association with the 1970s rather than with an evaluation of the different life chances experienced by individuals born at different times.

Conclusions

4.1 While recent work on generations, written for more 'popular' audiences, has emphasised the importance of generational location for informing an individual's sense of identity, and has focussed on the inequity and potential conflict between generations, there is little evidence of anger or conflict in the articulations of generational belonging here. In contrast, for a large portion of the sample their location as part of a specific historical generation, i.e. a cohort born at the end of the 1950s, is clearly only of marginal significance. This is even more telling given the circumstances in which the interviews were carried out. First the focus is on a sub-sample of the 1958 British Birth Cohort Study who have been part of a longitudinal study since childhood and therefore potentially made to feel special by virtue of their birth-date (Parsons 2010), and second the explicit question about 'belonging to a specific generation' was asked towards the end of a research interview, once individuals had already been encouraged to tell their life story and thus to focus on their historical location. In other words, the nature of the sample and the circumstances in which the idea of generational belonging were discussed would lead us to expect cohort members, if anything, to overstate their sense of generational identity.

4.2 As noted above, there were no differences by gender or social class in the patterns of responses to the question on generational identity. Counter to the claims of authors such as McDaniel (2002), there is no evidence here that women have a more developed sense of generational belonging than do men. Indeed the themes of 'belonging to a decade', music and fashion, and relations between parents and children were all common in the responses of both male and female interviewees.

4.3 Cohort members' responses to the question on generational belonging also tell us something about the way the concept of generation is understood and articulated by this group. As has been demonstrated above, the term generation has connotations of life stage (or age and the ageing process); historical location (specifically affinity with decades of youth), and kinship relations – more specifically the roles of parent and child. The strategies used by cohort members to respond to our question about identity show that generation is indeed a polysemous term. This may be problematic in the context of research which aims to separate age, cohort, and historical period effects (Kertzer 1983). However, when talking with individuals about their generational identity in an interview context, it is important to be flexible about how the term is employed. Indeed the fact that 'generation' is interpreted and used in different ways also suggests that it does not play a central role in defining the identity of these individuals.

4.4 One explanation for the lack of a clear sense of generational belonging here, is that those born in 1958 are part of a 'passive' generation (Turner 2002). While some categorise those born in the late 1950s as part of the baby boomer generation, for the most part cohort members themselves are aware that it is those born in the previous decade who can more easily identify with the main motifs of baby boomers namely student sit-ins, mini-skirts, and flower power. This therefore confirms Vincent's argument that generations are defined and differentiated by quite narrow age ranges and specific experiences (Vincent 2005: 595). As McMullin et al. comment in relation to the concept of the baby boom generation 'Uncritically assuming that a like minded group of people exists by virtue of being born within a 20-year span is questionable. Doing so risks overlooking theoretically informed generational groupings within generations thereby under- or overstating generational differences.' (McMullin et al. 2007: 299). There is therefore clear evidence from the interviews that many cohort members dissociate themselves from the decade of the 1960s or the baby boomer generation.

4.5 There are some similarities perhaps with Skeggs' work on 'dis-identification'. In the same way that the young working class women she talked with made judgements about themselves that relied on distancing themselves from other groups, a number of cohort members use baby boomers as a comparison group in the construction of a tentative generational identity. However there is an important difference here. Whereas in Skeggs' work the construction of distinctions within the working class have moralistic, or value-laden, overtones, the distinctions made by cohort members between the true baby boomers or sixties generation, born immediately after the war, and their own generation, are couched in much more neutral terms. Indeed the individuals who make this distinction tend to be those in relatively high status occupations who are able to use the term 'baby boomer' to display their linguistic competence, understanding and reflexivity to the interviewer. They are therefore not aiming to 'defend against misrecognition and devaluation' or to 'attach value through respectability' in the ways recently highlighted by Skeggs in relation to her earlier ethnographic research (Skeggs 2011: 503). Although there may be 'active' and 'passive' generations in the way discussed by Turner, these do not have the same resonances or consequences for individual identities and claims for value as persons, as do middle class and working class identities.

4.6 What is also striking, however is that, in contrast to recent literature that focuses on potential conflict between generations, even among those very few cohort members who do have a relatively developed sense of their own generational location (e.g. interviewee P435 quoted above) there is a lack of evidence of conflict, or opposition, between generations. Rather the focus is on external structural or societal factors which are discussed as though they are fixed or de-humanised, and certainly not the responsibility of other generations.

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Appendix 1: Topic Guide

NCDS: SOCIAL PARTICIPATION & IDENTITY PROJECT

PILOT INTERVIEWS TOPIC GUIDE

Notes to Interviewers concerning the use of this guide:

- All questions must be asked.
- In the interests of building rapport and encouraging conversation, it is not necessary to read out each question *verbatim*. While it should be, or should become, possible to memorise shorter questions, longer questions can be re-phrased or adapted slightly as long as the substantive content is covered. However, if a word or phrase within a question or statement has been **bolded** it *must* be used exactly as it appears.
- Probes under questions largely represent *possible* lines of development/areas to request expansion on depending on the interviewee's response to the preceding question. However, if a probe has been placed in *italics*, the supplementary question or subject area it refers to *must* be covered.

- Further guidance and conventions relating to specific questions and subject areas are provided in separate notes under the various section headings.

SECTION 1: NEIGHBOURHOOD AND BELONGING (10–15 minutes)

Q1. We know a bit about your housing history from your survey responses but we would like to know a little bit more about your **involvement in your current neighbourhood**. Can I begin by asking you **how long you have lived here and about how you came to live here?**

Probe for:

Whether choice of residential location contingent on particular life events (job/career, marriage, kids etc)

Where they lived before.

How often they've moved.

Q2. Do you feel you belong here?

Probe for:

What are the neighbours like?

Do you feel part of a community?

Do you feel this is the right place for you?

Q3. When people ask where you are from, what do you say?

Q4. Do you think you will continue living here in the future? Under what circumstances might you move and where to?

Probe for:

Possible reasons for staying or going – job movements, children/family reasons, local amenities, housing career etc.

Q5. What would your **ideal house** be like, and where would it be located?

SECTION 2: PARTICIPATION (15–20 minutes)

The survey included questions about your spare time interests and activities but we are not sure that these questions gave you enough scope to describe and explain what you do. We therefore want to ask some additional questions.

Q6. First, could you talk me through your last week and then last weekend in terms of how you **spent your spare time?**

Probe for:

Outside the home –

How often do went out, *what they did*, where they went, how long they spent, who they did it with/met

Motivation – *why/how did they become interested*, what do they get out of it, how long have they been doing it, *how involved are they*

Inside the home –

What they did when they stayed in, how long do they spend doing it, did they do with anybody

Why/how did they become interested, how long have they been doing it

Q7. Is this a **typical pattern?**

Probe for:

How, when, and *why it might vary*

Q8. Do you belong to any **organised clubs** or have any **formal associations** – for example do you attend a **church** or **evening classes**, or are you a member of a **political party**, **sports club** or **musical group?**

Probe for:

Length, extent of, reasons for involvement

The local significance such organisations/activities, types of people involved

Subscriptions to organisations/causes

Q9. (*If not raised above*) Do you do any **voluntary or charitable work?**

Probe for:

What this involves – function, time

Reasons for getting involved or for not getting involved

Q10. How have your interests and involvements **changed or developed over time?**

Probe for:

Q11. To what extent does your **leisure time** and **social life** overlap with **family life**?

Probe for:

Do you find you spend most of your leisure time with family, or do you spend most of your time with friends? How does what you do with your partner/family differ from what you do with friends?

Q12. Does your job or work situation affect your leisure activities in either a positive or negative way?

Probe for:

Demands of work, e.g. irregular hours, overtime, working away, holiday entitlement

Workplace social events

Sense of work/life balance, priorities

(If has one) impact of partner's job on leisure time/opportunities

SECTION 3: FRIENDSHIPS (15–20 minutes)

(Give separate sheet with ring diagram entitled 'Personal Community Map' to interviewee)

Q13. Looking at this page with the five concentric rings marked on, can you please think of **those people who are important to you**, and write their names in, with those who are **most important closest to the centre** *(allow five minutes for interviewee to complete this)*

Note: where the respondent offers comments about how difficult or easy this is, encourage comments and reflections (in order to encourage discussion about the criteria being evoked).

Q14. Thank you. For each person you've listed could you say:

- Why has that person been placed there (in a specific location within the 5 circles)? **In what way are they important to you?**
- How would you describe your relationship to that person (e.g. mainly 'fun/sociable' or confiding?)

Probe for:

How often do you keep in touch?

What do you talk about?

How has your relationship with this person changed in importance or intensity?

Note: Do not probe specifically for the terms used to describe the relationship (best friend, colleague, family, etc) since we want to know the lay terms used by respondents.

Ensure that when the respondent points to an individual the name of that person and their position within the ring structure is also clearly mentioned for the tape transcription.

When this exercise has been completed, please indicate the relationship of each person to the cohort member by annotating the diagram (e.g. Mum; Bro; Aunt; Cous; Fr=friend; Wk for work colleague, etc) in a different colour ink to one used by the interviewee.

Q15. And thinking specifically about **the Christmas holiday period**, who do you generally spend time with? How much does it vary year by year?

Q16. Thinking about the people you have included here as being most important to you, who would you say you rely on for most of your emotional support?

SECTION 4: LIFE STORIES & TRAJECTORIES (up to 30 minutes)

The NCDS has collected a lot of information about your life over the years. But we'd now like to give you more of a chance to say what has been important in your life from your own perspective.

Q17. So could you talk me through your **life story** as you see it?

Note: Reassure the interviewee that they can take as much time as they wish or need.

It is particularly important not to prompt or to offer any structure at this point but to let people construct their own response and to give them some time to work out how they want to do it. If they ask for clarification, indicate that there is no 'right' way to do this and encourage them to start where or with what they want to.

Only if, after 10 minutes or so, people are really struggling to give a response, or if their response is very short and they have actually finished their account after a few minutes, should they be given some assistance/asked to expand using the following prompt structure:

- **Starting with your childhood could you say a bit about**
 - **what kind of child you were**

- **how you got on at school**
- **who had the most influence on your life**
- **Thinking about when you left school and decided what to do next ...**
- **Going back to your early years of work and your twenties...**
- **Focusing on your thirties...**
- **Finally thinking back over the past five or ten years...**

Q18. Have you covered all of the major points you want to cover? What would you say have been the **key influences and turning points**?

Probe for:

Why were they important – *how and why they changed the course of a life or lives?*
Influential people as well as events/situations

Q19. If you had to depict your life up to now by means of a diagram, which of these diagrams would you choose (*show separate 'Life Trajectories' sheet to interviewee and ask them to mark which one with a tick*), or if none of these apply, can you draw a more representative pattern in the blank box?

Note: where the respondent offers comments about how difficult or easy this is, encourage comments and reflections (in order to encourage discussion about the criteria being evoked).

SECTION 5: IDENTITIES (15–20 minutes)

We are interested in **how you see yourself as a person**, and whether and in what ways this might have shifted or changed over the course of your life.

Q20. Generally speaking, could you tell me **how you define yourself**?

Note: do not offer possible characteristics. It is important to get the lay categories which are meaningful to respondents.

Q21. Do you think of yourself as **belonging to a social class**?

Probe for:

If so, which one, and why? If not, why not?

Have you always felt this way? *Did you feel you belonged to a particular social class when you were growing up?*

Have particular experiences ever made you more or less aware of yourself as belonging to a class?

Note: if respondents refer to themselves as 'ordinary', they should be asked to expand on what they mean by this.

Q22. How much do you think your **occupation or working life** has shaped your sense of who you are?

Probe for:

Would you say you've had a career?

Q23. As you probably know, the NCDS was chosen as a representative sample of British people born in 1958. **What does 'British' mean to you?**

Probe for:

Alternative, preferred, labels – English/Scottish/Welsh/Irish/Black British etc. – and their meaning

How patriotic do you feel?

Q24. Do you think of yourself as **belonging to a particular generation**?

Q25. What are the main advantages and disadvantages of being the age you are?

Probe for:

Health and physical factors

Q26. How important is being a woman/man to your sense of who you are?

Probe for:

Has this changed over time?

Q27. Can I ask you to look at this diagram (*show separate 'Gender and Identity' diagram with male-female spectrum line on it to the interviewee*)? Some people think that there is a continuum between masculinity and femininity. If you agree, where would you place yourself on this line? (*Once this has been done*)

Would you always have positioned yourself there or might you have chosen a different place on the line in a different period of your life?

SECTION 6: MEMBERSHIP OF THE NCDS (10 minutes)

Finally, we'd like to find out more about what it has been like for you to be a member of the NCDS – whether it's been a good and interesting experience, how it might have been improved, whether we've been asking the right types of questions, and so on.

Q28. Do you have any memories of being in the study as a child?

Probe for:

What? Whether unsettling or enjoyable, etc.

Q29. As an adult there has been the opportunity to be interviewed 6 times between age 23 and 50. Can you recall any occasions on which you didn't take part and what the reasons for this were?

Note: if the response to this question doesn't match the interviewee's actual participation record or if they have missed an interview but can't recall, remind them and prompt again for reasons for not taking part.

Q30. Have you ever thought of dropping out?

Probe for:

Why/ Why not? When?

What have been the most frustrating aspects of being a panel member?

What would improve the experience of being a panel member?

Q31. Has being part of the NCDS had any impact on your life?

Probe for:

Whether it makes them feel somehow different from other people

Do you ever talk about being a panel member with anyone? Who? In what context?

Does the experience of being a panel member ever encourage you to reflect on your own life and experiences?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH! That's the last question in this interview but before we finish are you happy that we've covered everything you wanted to say? Is there anything else you would like to raise or mention?

Notes

¹This is of course a slight simplification as it is possible that a few members of this cohort at age 50 could have grandparents still alive. However this would be rare and there is unfortunately no information about this in the quantitative dataset – only about parents, children and grandchildren.

²Interestingly there is a rather separate strand of literature on familial relations and intergenerational transfers of finance and care that also employs the notion of generation and includes some discussion of the distinction between historical generations (e.g. Brannen 2006; Mason et al. 2007)

³These early labour market experiences have been demonstrated to have a long-term scarring effect, particularly on the occupational earnings of men from the 1958 cohort (Gregg & Tominey 2005; Bukodi et al. 2012). However it's also worth noting work on social mobility that suggests that this cohort had greater opportunities for mobility than the later born 1970 cohort (Blanden & Machin 2007, 2008)

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