An Intergenerational Approach to Transitions to Adulthood: The Importance of History and Biography

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss the importance of taking an historical, intergenerational approach in sociological research. Lives need to be understood in the contexts of particular times and places. The backcloth to our discussion is the contemporary disruption of many young people's life course transitions from education to work in Europe, particularly in the Mediterranean countries but also among some young people in the UK, the main focus of the paper. We discuss two concepts and debates that have attracted attention in social science and the public domain. One concerns the designation of unemployed young people as a 'lost generation' and the other relates to assumptions about 'intergenerational conflicts'. These concepts are prone to ignore the historical specificity of the contexts in which and to which they are applied. They also take those contexts as impervious to political intervention. In short they serve to uphold a rhetoric of inevitability about the present economic, political and public policies relating to young people and intergenerational relations. In order to demonstrate the importance of historical context on young people's transitions to adulthood, using a life course biographical approach we analyse an empirical example of a father and son taken from an intergenerational family study conducted in the UK. In this case we also adopt an historical intergenerational lens to show how young people's transitions are supported by other family generations and are thus not individualised pathways to adulthood.

Keywords: Transitions to Adulthood, Intergenerational Relationships, Contextualised Life Course Perspective, History-Biography Dynamic

Introduction

1.1 In this paper we discuss the importance of taking an historical, intergenerational approach in sociological research. Lives need to be understood over time and in particular times and places. The backcloth to our discussion is the contemporary disruption of many young people's life course transitions from education to work in Europe during a period of mass unemployment, particularly in the Mediterranean countries but also among some young people in the UK, the main focus of the paper. We will first interrogate two concepts and debates that have attracted attention in social science and the public domain.

1.2 The first concerns the designation of unemployed young people as the 'lost generation'. The other debate relates to the dependency ratio as the contribution of those of working age falls in relation to the rising numbers of elderly people of pensionable age. In this context there is discussion about 'intergenerational conflict'. Our argument is that these concepts are prone to ignore the historical specificity of the contexts in which and to which they are applied. They also take those contexts as impervious to political intervention. In short they serve to uphold a rhetoric of inevitability about the present economic, political and public policies relating to young people and intergenerational relations.

1.3 In order to show the value of looking at young people's transitions to adulthood in historical context we then draw upon an empirical example of a father and son taken from an intergenerational family study conducted in the UK and to which we also apply an historical intergenerational lens, comparing the father's and son's generations. Using a life course biographical approach we analyse their transitions to adulthood and the ways in which they are shaped in very different historical contexts. The cases are taken from an ESRC funded British intergenerational study of fatherhood among white British, Irish origin

and Polish fathers (Brannen 2012, Brannen et al 2013, Brannen forthcoming 2015). The cases also demonstrate intergenerational solidarity and transmission in terms of how transitions to adulthood are supported by members of different family generations.

1.4 After a discussion of the contextualist life course approach in relation to perspectives on youth research more generally we address the concepts of the lost generation and intergenerational conflict. We then turn to an analysis of two cases that will show the importance of an intergenerational lens when studying life course transitions in particular historical periods.

Perspectives on life course transitions

2.1 Two main perspectives have been identified in youth research: the ***cultural*** perspective mainly drawing on ethnographic research to explore a variety of local expressions of youth culture, and the ***transitions*** perspective focussing on quantitative data to examine education to work transitions in structural contexts (Furlong et al 2011). Against the backcloth of this theoretical divide, MacDonald (2011) discusses what has changed and what has remained the same over a 30 year period in UK research on youth transitions. He suggests that in order for youth research to gain more relevance, particularly with reference to youth unemployment, the theoretical divide needs to be bridged. In an earlier study by MacDonald et al (2001) examples are drawn from a longitudinal qualitative study to demonstrate how the two traditions can be integrated in designs using biographical interviews. Furlong et al (2011) discuss the same divide and suggest an approach to bridge the gap between the two: a social generation perspective. This takes both cultural and structural dimensions into consideration while also emphasising historical context and change. Roberts (2009), addressing the same research area, makes the case for approaching youth transitions through an opportunity structure theory that takes into account changing structural circumstances that affect individual transitions in different historical periods.

2.2 While we address ourselves to similar questions as the above researchers, our methodological approach is based upon a contextualist life course perspective (Elder 2006). The life course perspective has its origins in the biographical approach (Thomas and Znaniecki 1958 [1918-20]). What sets it apart from other perspectives in sociology is the link between human agency, time, and structural features of a society (Mills 1980 [1959]). A classic text in this perspective is Elder's study ***Children of the Great Depression*** (1974, 1999). Based on longitudinal data of a cohort over time Elder studied the impact of economic deprivation during a period of childhood which coincided with the Great Depression (children born 1920-21 in Berkeley and Oakland, California USA) and the ways in which these experiences affected lives over the long term. Earlier psychological research suggested that deprivation in childhood affects the life course negatively but did not take account of context and historical period (e.g. Glueck and Glueck 1950). Elder, adopting the history-biography dynamic approach of C. Wright Mills (1959), argued that life course development must be understood in relation to the contextual features of society. His findings supported this contention. The period of affluence in post-war American society was very important for mitigating the effects of the Depression during childhood. Thus, uniquely for the period in which the study was conducted, Elder did not set out to formulate general de-contextualised 'laws' about individual development and ***predict*** how childhood deprivation would affect a life course. He was more interested in studying how historical contexts in themselves played a part in shaping a life course over time.

2.3 Important for the current discussion is that circumstances during different historical periods are products of complex interactions between social, economic and political factors. They are not forces of nature but are subject to change by political intervention. Examples of this include the New Deal during the Great Depression in the USA, the Marshall Plan for Western Europe after World War II, investment in public infrastructure and establishing a universal welfare state in the UK, as well as adopting regulation policies that sought to decrease social inequality. In Hobsbawm's (1994) terms, this was the Golden Age. From the 1980s in the USA and the UK in particular, financial markets were deregulated, union membership decreased, and wages for many groups of workers fell (Hobsbawm 1994, Stiglitz 2013). The highest rate of unemployment in the UK since the Great Depression was in 1984 (Hobsbawm 1994). After the 2008 financial crisis spending cuts and austerity measures, particularly in the public sector, have again brought about high rates of unemployment, especially among the young (Roberts 2009). The percentage of those unemployed as a proportion of those in work - among 16- to 24-year-olds - was 20% in 2011, much higher than in 2004. <http//www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/poverty-social-exclusion-assessment-full.pdf>.

2.4 In the UK while unemployment overall is falling in the first part of 2014, this is not true across the country (Dorling 2013) nor among young people, with many 'new' jobs part-time and insecure. Legislation to protect workers' rights is currently being revoked. Economists across ideological divides disagree about both the reasons for the crisis and the remedies to solve it, but politicians in international institutions such as the EU, The World Bank and the IMF (Stiglitz 2013) have adopted austerity measures rather than Keynesian strategies of public spending adopted in the past under even more difficult economic conditions. Evidence that challenges the usefulness of austerity measures and the downsizing of the public sector are not taken into consideration in contemporary European economic policies (Mazzucato 2013; Stiglitz 2013). In some areas of the social sciences political, social and economic conditions are often treated as the mere backcloth to discussions about the plight of some young people (see Wyn and Woodman 2006 for a similar argument). In parallel, social scientists' employment of notions of individualisation to understand biographical development flourished so that the historical aspect of the biography / society dynamic was underplayed (Mayer 2004; Nilsen and Brannen 2013). In the current situation such research has a deterministic tone that serves to uphold what we have termed a ***rhetoric of inevitability.***

The lost generation

3.1 The term 'the lost generation' stems from the early 20th century and was used to refer to the young men, many of upper class origin, who never returned from World War I, thus stripping Britain of its political, intellectual and financial élite (Winter 1977:449). The term has also been used in literature with reference to members of the same generation who were artists and writers who survived the war and lived in Paris in the inter-war years. In a number of studies in the 1980s and 1990s the term was used to refer to age groups of young people out of work for shorter or longer periods of time (Lynch 1985, MacDonald 2011), and with reference to young people's plights on a number of issues from alcohol consumption, living rough etc. The fact that the term has been used for a variety of purposes over time makes it all the more important in today's debates to clarify in what sense the concept is used. A search on Google Scholar shows a range of topics of research where the term has been central. Today, during a period of economic downturn that is the most severe since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the term refers to the young unemployed in Europe (Scarpetta et al 2010). In current discussions the argument is twofold: the first is made by economists and maintains that a lack of work experienced early in life will affect the rest of young people's lives and consigns cohorts of young people to a lifetime on the margins of society (e.g. Lynch 1985). The other and related way of using the term is with reference to young Europeans who emigrate to find work with resultant losses of 'human capital' for their countries of origin. However, it is rare to find migrants to Europe or the US described in 'lost generation' terms. Very few commentators talk about the 'lost generations' in countries where young people flee from poverty, war and famine or simply in search of better prospects for themselves and the families they leave behind in dire circumstances.

3.2 We find both the lost generation concept and the arguments that underpin it, questionable for several reasons. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that 'generation' is a concept with many meanings. In everyday usage it often refers to kin (Alwyn and McCammon 2004). Mannheim (1952 [1923]) defined generations as 'Individuals who belong to the same generation, who share the same year of birth, are endowed, to that extent, with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process.' (p. 290). In Mannheim's approach age is prominent, but ***generational location*** is also important, referring to spatial locality but more importantly to ***social location*** in society. Mannheim's approach thus includes a discussion of social class (p. 290). He further distinguishes between generation as ***actuality*** and as ***unit***. 'We shall therefore speak of a ***generation as an actuality*** only where a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic de-stabilisation' (p. 303). A generational ***unit*** is formed when peers are not only exposed to the same phenomenon but also that they respond in the same way as a collective. While some may argue that a widespread disenchantment with politics among some young people may encourage the development of a mass movement of young people who ***identify*** as a generational unit, there is no clear evidence for this (see Elliott 2013).

3.3 Secondly, the current use of the term lost generation refers to age or cohort rather than to Mannheim's definition. The term ***cohort*** means a group of people who experience the same historical event at about the same age (Ryder 1965). Thus the 'lost generation' may actually be more accurately termed the 'lost cohorts'. Both concepts are used in historical and demographic research (Hareven 2000, Elder 1974/1999). It may however be useful to keep the distinction between these two concepts because, while 'generation' implies the possibility of generational identity stemming from generation as unit, the term cohort implies no such subjective interpretation.

3.4 Thirdly, the lost generation concept also has an inbuilt ***individualistic and static slant*** in the sense that governmental solutions place emphasis upon young people finding work by their own efforts rather than on creating good employment opportunities for them. The term lost generation takes for granted that the future of young people can be predicted on the basis of current social and economic circumstances. While most studies suggest considerable movement between jobs and between employment and unemployment (Gregg 2001), little longitudinal data underpin the claim that cohorts exposed to unemployment in youth continue to show the effects of this throughout ***the whole life course*** irrespective of the economic context for the relevant groups and the economic policies during the historical period in question. However, some studies do show that effects of unemployment early in life may endure for some time (MacDonald 2011). Gregg and Tominey's (2005) National Child Development Survey analysis of those born in 1958 who entered the labour market and whose early employment trajectories covered the Thatcher period suggest that unemployment between the ages of 16 and 23 had long term effects on pay twenty years later. More recent evidence from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and Understanding Society concludes that, when unemployment is high for men leaving full-time education between 1991 and 2008, their careers are at risk of being permanently scarred (Taylor 2013).

3.5 Fourthly, there are at the same time growing inequalities between groups of young people (Melrose 2012, Roberts 2009). As Rigg and Sefton (2004) who also analysed BHPS data 1991-2000 note, 'the position of the richer individuals in the income distribution is less volatile than that of the poorer individuals (p. 16). The oldest cohort in this study as in Taylor (2013) was only 35 years old in 2010. A note of caution about extrapolating to the very long term thus seems in order. The cohorts who have reached the end of their time in employment and are now entering retirement are the baby boomers whose employment trajectories evolved over a period that covered public sector expansion, full employment, affluence and economic growth in countries like the UK (Hobsbawm 1994). These conditions were the result of policies adopted to create more social equality during the period. Even in countries with the highest rates of unemployment those with no education beyond compulsory schooling have much poorer prospects of finding a job than do those with higher education (Gregg 2001, Dorling 2013, OECD 2013). Social class is therefore as important as age in understanding patterns of unemployment among the young.

3.6 Lastly, the term 'lost generation' is a rhetorical one. It is deterministic, suggesting that the future is inevitable. Indeed it can be argued that political redress (especially in the UK) is largely through political

inaction and the withdrawal of any existing public policies to support young people's entry into the labour market. The current UK government has adopted a punitive approach (Melrose 2012), for example withdrawing the educational maintenance allowance for young people (for further education) plus a lot of other benefits, bringing about a situation in which young people have to take on huge loans to enter higher education and are unable to leave home. Indeed, as Mazzucato (2013) points out, current economic policies in the UK and across Europe rest on the myth that public spending is harmful for economic development.

Intergenerational conflict and solidarity

4.1 Referring to generation in kinship terms (Alwin and McCammon 2004), those belonging to a generation (lost or otherwise) exist *in relation* to other generations and increasingly overlap as people live longer; they are not free floating isolated age groups in society, as indeed our cases below demonstrate. When members of a younger generation have problems finding employment, other members in the young person's family are affected. In particular greater demands are often placed on the resources of the young person's family of origin. Thus we need to consider the plight of young people from an *intergenerational* perspective. In a life course approach this involves taking seriously the notion of 'linked lives' (Giele and Elder 1998) that emphasises the importance of family and kin in networks of social relationships. As Luscher and Hoff (2013) suggest, a distinguishing feature of generations are their boundedness, while at the same time they are integrated in a cross-generational succession and relationship.

4.2 The plight of the young is increasingly contrasted in current public and political discourse with the benefits that many of the baby boomer generation have enjoyed creating inequalities that are said to lead to major intergenerational tensions and conflicts (Chauvel 2006; Wyn and Woodman 2006; Willets 2010; Howker and Malik 2010). It is argued that older generations because of increased longevity are overly advantaged in public funding. However, as Guillemard (1996) points out, the debate confuses the concepts of cohorts and generations and, as other recent research has demonstrated, public transfers in the form of pensions to older cohorts form the basis for extensive transfer of funds downwards - from the older to the younger generations in families (Kohli and Künemunde 2003, Albertini and Kohli 2013). Attias-Donfut and Arber (2002) discuss the issue of generational conflict and contrast it with the concept of 'generational contract' which points to the solidarities and reciprocities that also exist between generations. Bengtson and Oyama (2012) argue that solidarity and conflict form a "unit of contraries" and maintain that few signs of intergenerational conflict currently exist in western societies but that they may develop under policy regimes that do not take intergenerational relationships seriously.

4.3 We have thus far discussed how current notions of a 'lost generation' and 'intergenerational conflict' both contribute to a *rhetoric of inevitability* because historical context is ignored and current political and economic conditions are taken as given. Thus political will fails to prioritise young people's life course transitions in general, and their labour market situation in particular. Instead, policy focus is on individuals taking responsibility in a difficult economic and employment climate.

An intergenerational case

5.1 A number of studies have focussed on development over time to examine effects of deprivation in early life course phases. Gregg and Tominey (2005) analysing longitudinal National Child Development Studies (NCDS) cohort data show how unemployment early in working life, that is between the ages of 16 and 23, has long term effects on pay 20 years later when the 1958 cohort reached the age of 42 (in 2000), compared with those who experienced no or little unemployment earlier. In understanding these long-term effects it is however necessary to examine the economic context and the labour market opportunities open to this minority group (16% of the cohort) between 1980 and 2000. In a qualitative longitudinal study conducted 2000-2010 in Teesside by Shildrick et al (2010) in which different age groups were interviewed, the authors found that in spite of strong work commitment and even among those with higher education, many were caught in a cycle of poverty over time. This study demonstrates the importance of location and local labour markets in addition to period-specific conditions. Together the findings in all the studies cited are supported by what Elder (1974, 1999) has pointed to, that the link between periods of unemployment in youth and later life course development is dependent on period-specific conditions, economic policies, local labour markets, the resources of the groups least well resourced to withstand difficult employment conditions and the life course events they experience subsequently.

5.2 In order to demonstrate the importance of historical context on young people's transitions to adulthood, using a life course biographical approach we analyse an empirical example of a father and son taken from an intergenerational family study conducted in the UK. We have selected a case of a white working class British father and his working class son. In this case we also adopt an historical intergenerational lens to show how young people's transitions to adulthood play out in different contexts and the ways in they are supported by other family generations, thereby suggesting they are not individualised pathways to adulthood. The study, Fatherhood across three generations in white British, Irish and Polish families focused on family lives over three generations and set out to examine change and continuity in families, the processes and types of intergenerational transmission that take place in families and how fatherhood is negotiated and shaped by the contexts of migration (Brannen 2012, Brannen et al 2013, Brannen et al 2014). It selected chains of grandfathers, sons and grandsons in thirty families[1]. The study adopted a case study design and a life story and biographical interview method - a modified version of the biographic-interpretive approach that sought to produce retrospective narratives (Wengraf 2001)[2]. While its focus was on fatherhood it covered men's transitions to adulthood, in relation to education, employment and other markers of adulthood (housing, marriage, children). The study shows how the successes of and challenges faced by members of one generation have a bearing *across*

generations in families and how these transitions play out in different ways in specific temporal contexts. The intention was not to generalize in a statistical sense but to understand specificities while setting the cases in wider social contexts (Brannen and Nilsen 2011).

5.3 In the cases of a white British father and son, the father a member of the baby boomer generation and the son born in the 1970s, we illustrate how the life course transitions of individuals can be understood with reference to intergenerational relations set in historical and biographical contexts (Nilsen et al 2013). Names, places and other identifiable dimensions in the data have been altered to ensure anonymity.

Geoff

5.4 Geoff (the grandfather generation) was born in 1940 in the South East of England, the third of nine children and of working class origin. His father was in the armed forces and largely absent until Geoff was three and WWII was over. His mother was a housewife, as was common following the end of wartime and throughout Britain in the 1950s. When Geoff's father was demobilised he went into the construction industry and then worked as a delivery manager in a local business. Until Geoff was seven, his family lived in a small two bed-roomed house with his maternal grandparents, who were the tenants. Overcrowding forced the family to move; with the massive postwar reconstruction and the expansion of public housing in Britain, the family was eventually allocated a council house not far from Geoff's grandparents. With a large family and only his father working, time and money were in short supply. Like many children born in the war, Geoff considered his father's absence in his early life to be formative for their subsequent relationship, '*Cos 1941 was war years, so my father was away at the war - in fact, he never saw me until I was about 3 years of age. So I never had a close tie - I have to be honest - with my father at that time, and even, as I'll explain to you, in later life.'*

5.5 Like other working class young men of that time, Geoff's transition to adulthood came early in the life course. In 1957 aged 16, he was given a place to study art at a college, a time when few working class British young people stayed on in upper secondary education much less went to university. However, Geoff did not go to college and instead started work. This was the year his eighth and youngest sibling was born and his parents needed him to contribute to household income: *'… it was very austere times. And my parents decided that I would (pause) they said no, you can't do that, we want you out at work earning a wage to help with the house. So I was pretty blasé about it, you know. I thought 'well fair enough I'll get out and do some work' - which I did. So at 16 I was out working*.'

5.6 Geoff worked in a supermarket and in 1960 by the age of 19 became the manager. But with the urge to '*move around a bit'* he got a job as a driver and then went into wholesale distribution eventually managing a large warehouse. Jobs were plenty in those days even for those without formal qualifications. Looking back to the affluent era of Britain's 'swinging sixties' and with no family ties Geoff considered he was earning 'a lot of money' and 'sowing his wild oats', '*I thought I was really the business'.*

5.7 Geoff moved jobs several times and aged 27 in 1968 he met a girl at work whom he married a year later. Just as his parents had lived with his maternal grandparents, so Geoff and his wife started married life living with her mother. A year later they bought a one bedroom flat. Geoff then moved jobs again and he and his wife sold the flat to live elsewhere near work. The couple then bought a newly built three bed-roomed house just before the birth of their son, Adam, in 1973. A year later Geoff moved jobs again and the family had to move. A second son followed two years later and a third when Geoff was 39. Jobs and housing moves continued with Geoff often working long hours, either because of job demands or a long commute to work. In the mid 1970s Geoff was doing well working for a group of companies. Then in the 1980s the bubble burst and Geoff was made redundant with one month's salary, '*we (company) were about 2 million overspent. But it was a time when (pause) I look back on it now and it seems long ago. I mean we were members of a fancy club in (Central London), we used to go up there and think nothing of spending £200 on a meal, you know, and it was all paid for by the company. But of course the chickens had to come home to roost*.'

5.8 Geoff's sudden fall from high flier to unemployment was a real blow to him, '… *hell of a shock - from a position of hiring and firing, making people redundant, suddenly I was made redundant - and it was a hell of a blow - to your ego, your self-respect, the lot'*. Geoff was however not alone in this experience at that time. The jobless rate in the UK reached its highest since the Great Depression; in 1984 11.9% of the workforce was unemployed. As is commonly the case, workers with few formal qualifications had the hardest time finding new employment. But Geoff next trained as a train driver with a public sector employer, *'I had to bite the bullet*'. However, he later moved back to the private sector as a contracts manager and the company went from strength to strength during the Thatcher period of free enterprise. He became a non-executive director but again lost his job. At this time his wife left him. After a short period of unemployment (about 5 months) he found another job in the private sector (retail distribution) '*and set about putting my life back together. … that time I spent with them [19 years] enabled me to restore my credit and my financial situation to such a degree it's enabled me to help my children out myself during that period of time'*. Since his spells of unemployment lasted for short periods only Geoff did not claim benefits seeing unemployment as an individual problem in accordance with the neo liberalism of the 1980s *'. . . it hits your self esteem. And the first thing you start saying is 'Well what have I done wrong, what did I do wrong? What's wrong with me, why has this happened?' And suddenly your self confidence really hits a low, it's surprising. There's probably more pain in that than physical pain. And so once you get into that 'feel sorry for yourself' situation it's a bloody hard run to get back up again*'. Geoff retired in 2008 aged 67 although his wife who went back to live with Geoff continued to work.

Adam

5.9 Geoff's son, Adam, the eldest of three boys, was born in 1973 when times were still relatively prosperous. Because his father's job changes involved moving house Adam's education was constantly interrupted; he attended approximately five schools. Adam followed a similar working class life course trajectory in terms of his transition to adulthood as his father had done. He did not enjoy school and left in 1989 at 16 with few qualifications. He left home, joined a Youth Training Scheme and found employment in a variety of low skilled jobs; during this period unemployment went down and it was easier to find work. Aged 20 in 1993, he went back home to live. With his mother's help Adam found a job as a healthcare assistant in the local hospital where four years later he met his wife who was Irish born and also working to gain experience following university. Adam married a couple of years earlier in the life course than his father (at the age of 26) and moved with his wife to live in Ireland. There he went back to working in the retail sector, one area of the economy that was expanding at the time and changed jobs a couple of times. He eventually became a store manager which involved working excessively long hours. At 28 in 2001 he had his first child, a son, but because he was working up to 90 hours a week he saw little of him.

5.10 The couple returned to England, living for a while with his parents. Following further jobs in sales where the culture of long working hours including week-ends was the norm, Adam's wife encouraged him to return to the National Health Service as a healthcare assistant while she went back to her profession, also in the health service. Because Adam's wife was in a professional occupation, and was always likely to be the higher earner, Adam felt able to make the change from the long hours culture of sales into health care and the public sector that was still regulated at the time. After the second child was born his wife began studying for a higher degree. Adam's shift pattern allowed him to work flexibly which was underpinned by the National Health Service's work-life policy for 'Improving Working Lives' which was in existence at the time. It also offered him further educational opportunities which he was undertaking at interview. Aware of the economic uncertainties of the future, in particular public investment in the NHS, Adam reflected back on his life, in particular how he had failed to work hard at school. At interview he was hopeful that his current investment in education would not be in vain, '*My working life's been hindered a lot by my mucking about at school a lot. But uh, you know, I'll be qualified by the time I'm 39, so (pause) and that you know opens up once you're in the NHS and then get into the management structure of it, you know (pause) if there's still an NHS as we know it (pause) fingers crossed there is*.'

Geoff and Adam compared

6.1 While fatherhood was the main concern in the study from which this case is taken, the focus of the current paper is to compare the life course of Geoff and Adam in historical context.

6.2 Geoff belongs to the baby boomer generation and for the period in which he was growing up, as a white working class male he is typical of his cohort. He left school early and, as a member of a large family, despite having the opportunity to study he was expected to enter the labour market and earn a wage to contribute to the household economy. Adam by contrast has a similar working class educational and employment trajectory as that of his father but experienced a period in which employment conditions for low educated young people were becoming more difficult.

6.3 Both generations received help with housing from their parents in the early phase of parenthood when affordable housing was hard to find; Geoff and his parents lived with his grandparents for a while before they were allocated council housing during the post-war years, and after he married they lived for a while with his wife's mother during the early phase of parenthood. Adam and his wife lived with his parents for a time when they returned to England, while Geoff mentions being able to help his children financially. In earlier cross-national research similar arrangements across generations in times of difficulty for the younger generation have been found (Nilsen et al 2012). Office of National Statistics figures show that in the current context when rents and house prices have never been higher British young people are increasingly living at home with parents (http://www.if.org.uk/archives/2236/ons-figures-reveal-the-boomerang-generation-is-now-3-million-strong). This suggests that older and younger generations are facing up to hardship together and sharing resources when they are scarce. The fact that parents had the means to help out younger generations in what appears to be a continuous process of transmissions is again testimony to other cases in the study that show how parents including those working class families who had started out with few skills and qualifications but lived through a period of high employment and affluence (in particular benefiting from rising house prices) help the younger generation in so far as they are able.

6.4 Comparing their employment and fatherhood trajectories, Geoff lived through a period of prosperity and affluence at the start of his working life, and later through the recession during the Thatcher era and subsequent economic growth. His transition to work and adulthood took place during a time when jobs were in abundance and the consequences of globalisation for workers with low, or no, qualifications were not yet fully felt in the Western world (Roberts 2009). Geoff's earnings in early employment were an important contribution for his large family of origin. During 'The Golden Years' employment opportunities were plentiful regardless of education and so he had no reason to worry about his lack of qualifications and skills. His brief spells of unemployment were a shock to him and others like him, because unemployment had come to be regarded as 'a thing of the past' (Hobsbawm 1994). Geoff, like many working class men of his cohort, took on the role of sole breadwinner when his children were young and hence was little involved in their upbringing and daily life. His family practices fit more with ***fatherhood*** as a status than they do with current active practices of ***fathering*** (Brannen and Nilsen 2006).

6.5 Adam's transition to work was similar to his father's. Indeed, had Geoff had foresight in 1989 of what was to come he might well have insisted that Adam stay at school longer and not leave at 16 as he had done. After a variety of semi skilled jobs, when Adam became a father he was working long hours in sales in the private sector. However, after he moved into the health care sector he reinvented himself as a father. He took advantage of a flexible work scheme in the National Health Service that enabled him to

take responsibility for a significant amount of his young children's care. Such employment opportunities were not available for Geoff's generation since flexibility for employed parents had yet to be invented and sole breadwinning was more the norm for fathers. Moreover, the increase in jobs in the health and caring sectors, especially for men, was considerable over the decades between the two generations' entry into the labour market. A further backcloth to this was changing attitudes and expectations of fatherhood together with the limited changes in public policy concerning employment flexibility for working parents. Geoff pointed to the norm of the father being the main breadwinner at the time he was bringing up children, while Adam (with a higher earning wife) rejected from a present day perspective the idea that breadwinning should curtail men's involvement with their children and he was highly supportive of public policies to support fathers.

6.6 The two men's aspirations for their children clearly differed and need to be put in their historical and social contexts. While Geoff accepted Adam's 'choice' about what he did on leaving school, Adam described feeling neither encouraged nor motivated by his father to do better when he was young. In the current period he was determined to ensure that his young son did not repeat his own mistakes; '*… and the biggest thing I want to get across to him is 'Don't leave school at 16'. But he's not going to, he's a very intelligent little boy. … And you know he's got (pause) we're not going to force it on him, but as much as we can we're going to make sure he goes to university and beyond, because you know the sky's the limit with his intelligence. … I don't want him to make the mistakes that I did, and I don't think he will - we won't allow him to.'* Indeed, at interview his aim was to be a different kind of father from his own and to get his son into the local grammar school[3] and he said he would do all he could to bring it about. On the other hand, there are strong transmissions between Geoff and Adam concerning the kinds of men they considered themselves to be (see Brannen et al 2013).

Conclusion

7.1 As a starting point, the paper suggests young people's life course transitions in the current crisis and conditions of high youth unemployment are seen only from a static ahistorical perspective with the result that it is assumed that nothing can be done. Prominent among associated conceptualisations are the thesis of 'the lost generation' and the notion of 'intergenerational conflict'. Following C. Wright Mills' proposition that history and biography constitute a dynamic, we have addressed ourselves to both aspects. History is not only about individual and collective actions and perspectives, neither is it determined by events and circumstances beyond external, including political, control. Following Elder's contextualist life course approach the paper suggests that understanding a social phenomenon such as the transition to adulthood and its consequences for the subsequent life course of young people has to take account of the cohort the young people are born into, the point in the life course and the social contexts when they are subject to deprivation and their positioning in terms of social class, gender and race. In particular, it is necessary to attend to the ways in which family intergenerational relationships are able to support and sustain young people in the new situations they face. In short, understanding a group or cohort of young people in contemporary society benefits from an intergenerational lens that attends to transmission across generations and how transitions play out in different historical periods and in particular political, economic and policy contexts.

7.2 Frames of reference such as that of a 'lost generation' in discussions about young people's life course transitions renders an overly simplistic picture of what are complex social processes that take place over time. Indeed, one of the few longitudinal studies into how period-specific phenomena affect the life course of young people over the whole life course, Glen Elder's *Children of the Great Depression*, suggests that historical circumstances such as a boost in employment opportunities created by economic policies intended to improve people's opportunities in the long term mitigate some of the effects of deprivation in earlier life course phases. The lives of Geoff and his son Adam illustrate the history-biography dynamic as well as the importance of intergenerational relationships during the transition to adulthood.

7.3 The case demonstrates both breaks and continuities of class positions across the generations. While Adam followed the same timing of the transition from education to work as his father did several decades earlier, his marriage to a woman with higher education meant an upward move for him and his family as compared with his family of origin. In this regard it is worth noting that intergenerational social mobility has traditionally been measured by the education and occupation of men while women's mobility has been considered in relation to marriage. Such measures reflect the period in which they were constructed (Dorling 2013), namely in periods when women were either not in paid work or secondary earners (Crompton and Mann 1986). The case of Adam therefore demonstrates period-specific circumstances in the changing pattern of mobility and the need for measures to reflect new trends given that women now form the majority in higher education in many western countries (OECD 2013).

7.4 While we have not explicitly sought to address the situation of the young unemployed in contemporary Europe we have highlighted how overly simple terms and concepts in the debate about the current plight of young people can serve to obscure the potential for change and thus uphold a *rhetoric of inevitability* in discussions about economic and public policy. We have argued that social science needs to focus on history and biography as a dynamic and not on only one side at the expense of the other. We have shown the relevance of such an approach by discussing two life courses of men from two generations in the same family and setting them in historical context. Lastly, we have demonstrated that individual and social action during both prosperous and less fortunate times must be considered as embedded in historical context and in social relationships at many levels, intergenerational relationships in particular.

Notes

[1]Grandfathers who migrated from Ireland and their sons and grandsons, fathers who migrated from Poland including the grandfathers in Poland and the grandsons in the UK, and white British grandfathers and their sons and grandsons. The youngest generation (sons) were aged from 5 to 18 years. Thirty grandfathers, 30 fathers and 29 sons were interviewed (N= 89 interviewees). With the exception of the Polish fathers living in Poland, most were recruited in London and Southern England (Wigfall et al 2014).

[2]A crucial aspect of the analysis was the initial separation of the life history/ life course trajectory from the interpretive narratives. This strategy focused attention on the shape of the biographies, irrespective of how the individuals interpreted them. It thus enabled the analyst to be open to other life course directions the informants might have followed and the choices they might have made; for life stories are not histories, they are interpreted with hindsight and recounted in the present.

[3]The area in which he lived still had a few selective state schools and a large number of private schools.

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