
Age, Cohorts, and the Life Course

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The bond between age and time is central to a theoretical understanding of the life course and its foundational traditions, sociocultural and cohort-historical (Elder 1975). In the sociocultural perspective, age distinctions are expressed as social expectations regarding the timing of events and social roles, whether early, on time, or late. As normative age grades from childhood to old age, these age groups constitute a basis for self-other definition and evaluation as exemplified by the process of leaving childhood for the transition to young adult status. From a cohort-historical perspective, chronological age as birth year locates individuals in historical context and time through membership in a particular cohort, such as the Americans born during the first decade of the twentieth century.

Unlike normatively defined age strata, birth cohorts are not socially recognized or specified, although they may develop a shared mentality. Cohorts may be defined by historical markers of social change, for example, or simply by available data, as in a longitudinal study of people born in a particular year. An example of the latter comes

from the United Kingdom and its extraordinary array of national longitudinal cohort studies, each defined by birth in a single year: 1946, 1958, 1970, 2000, and 2011. Systematic comparison of such ordered cohorts in the rapidly changing society has yielded valuable information for policy makers. It is important to note that a particular social change may influence different subsets of a cohort differentially according to social class, gender, and race-ethnicity. Its impact also tends to vary across successive cohorts according to their career stage at the time of social change. Thus age-related changes both across and within cohorts inform our understanding of the intersection of history and personal biography.

The past half century has witnessed major advances in theorizing about cohorts as a way of understanding the biographical impact of social change and in studying the change process itself. Conceptual elaborations of the diverse meanings of age and the exponential growth of longitudinal studies have contributed to this advance and to the emergence of the life course as theory and field of study. By observing people's lives over many years, we have gained a deeper appreciation of their variation in relation to a changing world. In Part I of this chapter, we highlight the major contributions to such developments.

These contributions provide a framework for taking up the two complimentary approaches to cohort studies, an inter-cohort perspective that

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provides a “window to historical and social change,” and an intra-cohort approach. Part II examines inter-cohort studies, using a systematic survey of the literature’s contributions toward understanding social change and the dynamic transformations of broad social contexts within which lives unfold. The studies in this survey are designed to indicate whether and how society is changing, and do not typically relate social change to the life course. In Part III, a more focused explanatory approach in cohort research is used to reveal the distinctive contribution of intra-cohort studies. It demonstrates the ways in which social change can have very different consequences for specific subgroups “within cohorts” and their life course. The integration of inter-cohort and intra-cohort studies, as well as directions for future research, are addressed in Part IV.

1 Conceptual Issues and Perspectives

A cohort is a group of individuals who experienced an event of interest at the same time. Cohorts can be defined on the basis of any kind of event (e.g., entering college, becoming a parent). In the social and behavioral sciences, unless otherwise specified, cohort generally refers to a birth cohort – to individuals born at the same or approximately the same time. In this chapter, cohorts will refer to birth cohorts. Birth cohorts share one characteristic that is not typical for cohorts based on other events. Members of birth cohorts are the same or approximately the same age. This is untrue for the vast majority of cohorts based on other events. In a cohort of individuals who become first-time parents in the same year, for example, cohort members will vary substantially in age – probably covering an age range of 20 or more years. This inherent link between cohort and age for birth cohorts is the first in a number of complicating factors that arise when attempting to accurately attribute differences across cohorts or across age to specific processes.

1.1 Early Contributions

Although the definition of cohort is straightforward, the history of this concept in the behavioral and social sciences in general, and in life course theories in particular, is less so. It is fascinating that two watershed explications of the concept were published in the same year. Norman Ryder’s now-classic paper, “The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change,” was published in the *American Sociological Review* in 1965. That same year, K. Warner Schaie’s pioneering article, “A General Model for the Study of Developmental Problems,” appeared in *Psychological Bulletin*. These two journals were and are the flagship journals of sociology and psychology respectively. Because these two articles set the stage for theory and research on cohorts and remain foundational for contemporary studies, we review them in some detail.

Ryder’s primary purpose was to identify the processes by which social change occurs and he proposed that cohorts are the vehicles that bring about social change. In his words, “Cohorts do not cause change; they permit it. If change does occur, it differentiates cohorts of individuals from one another, and comparison of their careers or life trajectories then becomes a way to study change” (1965: 845). Ryder not only posits that cohorts can trigger social change, but that it is virtually axiomatic that they do. “The cohort record is not merely a summation of a set of individual histories. Each cohort has a distinctive composition and character, reflecting the circumstances of its unique origination and history” (1965: 844).

Ryder emphasized that the nature and amount of social change ushered in by cohorts differ widely. He identified five cohort characteristics that play a role in determining the content and size of social change that occurs as a result of cohort differentiation. First, and as implied above, cohorts that experience major social disruptions during adolescence and young adulthood will generate more social change than cohorts that come of age during times of stability.

Thus, events such as wars and major changes in economic conditions, such as the Great Depression, tend to generate large amounts of social change. Second, cohort size will affect the nature and volume of social change, with larger cohorts not only ushering in more change but also having the numerical power to imprint that change more firmly on the rest of society compared to smaller cohorts. Third, immigration has the potential to increase cohort differentiation. The number of immigrants who enter a society matter, with large numbers of immigrants arriving within a relatively short time creating more cohort differentiation than smaller numbers of immigrants. Ryder also suggested that internal migration from rural to urban areas is comparable to immigration from other countries. Fourth, major technological innovations can create significant differences across cohorts. Finally, social movements consisting mainly of young people more significantly affect cohort differentiation because young adults are more open to changes in the status quo than their older counterparts.

Ryder believed that adolescents and young adults constitute major agents of social change in society. He reviewed a number of studies indicating that historical events experienced during young adulthood have lasting effects on cohort members' attitudes and behaviors and that these effects are stronger than those exhibited by older and younger cohorts who also experienced the historical events. He also noted that the factors that create more social change tend to be experienced by and have greater consequences for young adults than for other age groups.

Wars mobilize the armed forces in which the vast majority of soldiers are young men (and now young women). At the time he wrote this article, wars also affected young women by delaying marriage and childbirth and, in some cases, reducing the number of men available for family formation. The majority of immigrants and internal migrants from rural to urban areas are young adults. With regard to cohort size, it is during adolescence and young adulthood that members of very large cohorts become painfully aware of the mismatch between their numbers and openings in the labor market. And lastly the marketing

of technological innovations is targeted disproportionately at younger members of society. Thus age interacts with social conditions to make adolescence and young adulthood the focal point for the history of a cohort and the nature of its differentiation from earlier and later cohorts.

A few of Ryder's other observations are pertinent. First, although Ryder mentioned the confounding of cohort, age, and period, he devoted very little attention to methods of statistically estimating their effects. Second, Ryder never used the phrase "cohort effect," although that has become the label of choice for understanding how cohorts differ. Instead, he used the term "cohort differentiation," which seems to be a more accurate descriptor. Third, Ryder was keenly aware of the substantial variability within cohorts, stating that "Every cohort is heterogeneous" (1965: 847). He recognized the importance of studying within-cohort variability for understanding individual lives and that within-cohort differences may exceed between-cohort differences. For the purposes of studying social change, however, Ryder firmly believed that between-cohort differences were the critical evidence.

At the same time that Ryder was exploring appropriate methods for studying social change, K. Warner Schaie was grappling with the identification problem in age-period-cohort designs and the implications of age effects for developmental science. Schaie endorsed Kessen's definition that "a characteristic is said to be developmental if it can be related to age in an orderly or lawful way" (cited in Schaie 1965: 93). Schaie's contribution to studying developmental change was the recognition that "orderly and lawful" age changes need to be isolated from cohort and period differences.

To achieve this, he proposed the now-familiar grid in which age, cohort, and time of measurement are arrayed in its rows, columns, and diagonals. Most of the paper focuses on what Schaie calls three sequential forms of research design and decision rules to use in identifying age changes that have been disentangled from cohort and time of measurement or period differences. The three sequential research designs are labeled

cohort-sequential, time-sequential, and cross-sequential. They differ only in the placement of age, cohort and time of measurement in the columns, rows, and diagonals of the grid. The decision rules involve estimating the effects of age, cohort, and time of measurement in two of the three sequential designs and using the patterns of results to estimate the extent to which the distribution of the dependent variable of interest reflects those three competing forces.

Today it is generally recognized that there is no way to totally disentangle age, cohort, and time of measurement effects (Yang and Land 2013). However a number of statistical strategies permit estimates of those three forces if the investigator is willing to make an assumption that frees one degree of freedom for estimation, with the nature of that assumption differing across strategies. Schaie's specific strategy is not popular now, but his depiction of the confounding of age, cohort, and period or time of measurement is accurate and compelling. Most importantly, Schaie demonstrated that longitudinal studies are not the panacea for solving this problem that many investigators had assumed in the 1960s.

Ryder and Schaie approached the issue of cohorts from very different disciplinary perspectives. For Ryder, cohort differences are the key to investigating social change. For Schaie, it was important to examine the effects of age with cohort differences taken into account – i.e., to substantiate that relatively uniform age changes are observed regardless of when individuals were born or when they were measured. Ryder's article is primarily conceptual; Schaie's methodological. But there are substantial similarities as well: both authors wanted to isolate one of three processes that are confounded in nature. They shared the view that all three processes are powerful, thus raising the ante for disentangling their effects. Both were interested in aggregate phenomena – as a population-specialist in sociology, Ryder focused more on between-cohort differences and their insights regarding social change in society whereas Schaie's career in studying how people age directed his efforts to isolating age changes that are observed across time and cohort succession in the lives of individuals.

Concepts of the life course and life span were undeveloped at the time Ryder and Schaie had their papers published, but they made substantial contributions to the role of cohorts in life course and life span development. Ryder's thinking about cohorts influenced Matilda White Riley's conceptualization of cohorts and their bio-social processes in aging and the life course, as represented by *Aging and Society* (with Johnson and Foner 1972). Later on she developed greater awareness of the structural lag between social institutions and the life course of aging cohorts. In the late 1970s, Riley organized and chaired a Social Science Research Council committee on the life course and human development.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, Schaie played a central role in promoting an analytic framework for studying trajectories of aging across birth cohorts. He did so in part as director of a training program in life-span development at West Virginia University that included postdoctoral students who became influential figures in the cohort study of human development and aging. One of these students, Paul Baltes, became a leading figure in the emerging life-span study of cohort effects in developmental psychology (Baltes et al. 1979).

1.2 The Challenges of Heterogeneity and Context

Two issues of theoretical and analytic significance became major themes in the social and behavioral sciences during the 1970s and 1980s and remain so: heterogeneity and context. Social and behavioral scientists were searching for ways to generate more nuanced and fine-grained understanding of human attitudes and behaviors. The call for increased attention to heterogeneity came from many sources, from a new focus on gender and socioeconomic variability within racial and ethnic groups to recognition of heterogeneity in the outcomes of stressful life events. Other investigators expressed dissatisfaction with survey data that provided little or no information about the social structural and interpersonal contexts in which individuals live as

well as on their life patterns. Studies began to show that time, place, and macro-, mezzo-, and micro environments had strong effects on human lives and that those effects had been understudied and were not well understood.

Consider the convergence of historical and ecological perspectives in longitudinal studies of birth cohorts. While birth year defines the historical location of a cohort, its specific socio-cultural and historical context is derived from an understanding of its social ecology. This interdependence is most obvious in national birth cohort studies which include adults from vastly different socioeconomic areas of a large country, such as the United States. But the most compelling documentation of this convergence comes from Robert Sampson's cohort-historical and ecological studies (2012) that evolved from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods during the 1990s. Data were obtained from longitudinal cohorts of young people, community surveys, the assessment of social networks and systematic social observations of neighborhoods and local city governance. He found that the culture and residents of a neighborhood were typically influenced by the quality of surrounding neighborhoods. Nearly all neighborhoods in the study were discovered to be linked across the years through the intra-city migration of people. This flow of people, young and old, typically connected neighborhoods of advantage and disadvantage, thereby perpetuating their inequality across the generations.

The increased attention to heterogeneity and context had relevance to cohort-historical analyses that sought to identify social change through cohort differentiation, but it was not a match for their powerful implications in developmental science. Once age changes were examined through the lenses of heterogeneity and context, developmental scientists quickly recognized that developmental processes occur in the context of environments, resulting in substantial heterogeneity in the processes themselves and their outcomes. In short, although developmental scientists did not abandon the search for age changes that are universal or nearly universal across time and place, a majority of developmen-

tal research became focused on variability within cohorts/age groups.

1.3 The Emergence and Consequences of Life Course Theory and Research

Although there were previous and notable attempts to study personal biography and life histories, life course theory and research began in earnest with Elder's now classic *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience* (1974). In the 40 years since its publication, life course research has become a staple of social and behavioral research. It laid the foundation for literally hundreds of studies, spurred the development and adoption of analytic techniques suited to testing its principles, and been usefully linked to a multitude of mainstream sociological and psychological theories (e.g., stress process theory). There is now general consensus that the life course perspective includes five principles: the principle of life-span development, the principle of agency, the principle of time and place, the principle of timing, and the principle of linked lives (Elder et al. 2003). Life course research typically does not address all five principles but all of them are central to the life course paradigm.

Importantly for our purposes, *Children of the Great Depression* (1974/1999) documented the importance of both cohort-historical and developmental (or within-cohort) perspectives on human lives. An important theme of this seminal work was that the social and economic disruptions caused by the Great Depression had very different consequences for cohorts of boys and girls born only 7 or 8 years apart in the 1920s. The Oakland study members were born in 1920–1921 and thus were old enough when hard times came to assist their parents. The Berkeley study members were born just before the Great Depression and consequently were dependent on parents during the most stressful time of family hardship.

The Berkeley boys were more adversely influenced by hard times than the Oakland boys, and

their psychological disadvantage extended into the adult years. However those who entered military service during or after World War II tended to recover their self-confidence and well-being. The Berkeley girls were protected in the Depression years by the emotional support and example of their mothers. In the Oakland cohort, girls in hard-pressed families were drawn into household chores during early adolescence, a time of physical and social maturation, and they often lacked attractive clothes for peer activities. As a result, they were more adversely affected by family hard times than the boys. Taking gender roles into account, these cohort differences are consistent with Ryder's observation about life-stage at time of social change and its consequences (1965; 846). As each cohort encounters historical events, it "is distinctively marked by the career stage it occupies". Moreover, these cohort by gender differences persist well into middle age.

In addition to cohort and gender differences, large amounts of within-cohort variability also were observed. Social class before the Great Depression and the amount of economic deprivation caused by the Depression, for example, generated differences in adult achievements, roles, and attitudes within cohorts. The observed within-cohort heterogeneity demonstrated that although cohort differences, especially those generated by significant social disruptions, have important consequences for biography, they are not equally important for all cohort members. As noted by gender, cohort members are situated in numerous contexts – only one of which is cohort – that combine to provide both opportunities and constraints for individual development.

This chapter is organized around the two major ways in which cohort is important to life course theory and research. The next section reviews the contributions that cohort-historical studies have contributed to our understanding of both social change and, in broad brush, widespread changes in the life course. The following section reviews research that focuses on within-cohort differences and their consequences for personal biography over the long-term. Cohort is an important contextual factor in understanding within-cohort differences, but a more complete and nuanced

understanding of the life course requires an emphasis on within-cohort variability.

A caveat about the concept of generation is needed at this point. The term "generation" has been used in two distinct ways in social and behavioral research (Alwin and McCammon 2003). First and as most frequently used, generation refers to statuses in the family (i.e., grandparents, parents, and children). Research defining generations as positions within the family faces some of the same issues that studies of cohorts do. Observed differences between generations may reflect differences based on family roles per se or they may reflect age or cohort differences. Thus, research on family generations confounds four factors: age, time of measurement, cohort, and family roles. Mannheim (1952) is generally credited with the second meaning of generation. He posited that persons born at approximately the same time (i.e., cohorts, although Mannheim did not use that term) have the potential to become "generations in actuality," although most cohorts do not. A cohort becomes a "generation in actuality" when it develops a "distinctive consciousness." Several conditions are required for the development of a "distinctive consciousness:" (a) a key historical event must occur, (b) the cohorts at-risk of becoming a generation in actuality will be young, (c) and the historical event is sufficiently disruptive as to shape the lives of adolescents and young adults. According to Mannheim, then, generation formation begins with cohorts, but requires an additional intersection of age and social/historical change. Interesting research exists that is based on both definitions of generation. This chapter, however, does not include attention to that research. Our focus is on the concept of cohort per se and its links and contributions to life course theory and research.

2 Cohort Differences: A Window to Historical and Social Change

The primary purpose of studying cohort differences is to monitor historical and social changes over time. Some studies of cohort differences are

based on age-period-cohort (APC) analyses; others are not. The advantage of APC analyses is that, to the extent possible, cohort differences are estimated with the potentially confounding influences of age and period (i.e., time of measurement) taken into account. APC studies are sometimes criticized as being descriptive rather than theory-driven and, indeed, many of them focus on describing time trends in phenomena of interest. But this is not necessarily the case and other APC analyses are based on theories of social change and/or test specific theory-based hypotheses.

The links between studies of cohort differences and the life course perspective are indirect. That is, cohort studies are not life course research in the sense that investigators set out with the objective of applying the five principles of the life course perspective to the substantive topic of interest. Inevitably, inter-cohort studies will accomplish less in terms of advancing life course research than intra-cohort studies, which are addressed in the next section. Nonetheless, inter-cohort studies (also termed here simply cohort studies) are not irrelevant to life course research. Cohort studies paint a broad picture of social and historical changes that is important for understanding individual lives. As an example, the life course implications of cohabitation are far different when 3 % of couples cohabit at some point in the life course than when 40 % of couples cohabit before their first marriage and another 10 % cohabit after divorce. Cohort studies provide valuable information about the social and historical contexts in which lives are embedded.

Inter-cohort studies also differ from intra-cohort studies in important methodological ways (the terms inter-cohort and intra-cohort will be used when they are being compared). Both inter-cohort and intra-cohort studies rely on longitudinal data, but the meaning of “longitudinal” requires specification. If “longitudinal data” refer to comparable data collected over multiple times of measurement, both inter-cohort and intra-cohort studies rely on longitudinal data. If, however, “longitudinal data” refers to panel data in which the same sample members are measured at

multiple times, few inter-cohort studies are longitudinal. Cohort studies do not typically use panel data. Even large panel data sources rarely include sufficient numbers of cohorts and times of measurement to permit inter-cohort studies of the scope needed to observe historical trends. Consequently, most inter-cohort studies use repeated cross-sectional surveys, such as those in the General Social Survey and National Health Interview Survey. It is interesting that Ryder (1965) noted that inter-cohort and intra-cohort studies would typically rely on different kinds of longitudinal data in his classic essay.

Another common difference between inter-cohort and intra-cohort studies is the way that factors other than the independent variable of primary interest are conceptualized and analyzed. By definition, variability in social status, life course transitions, and social resources and deficits is important in intra-cohort studies. These are precisely the kinds of factors that generate differences in life course trajectories. Thus, intra-cohort studies focus on understanding variability across individuals and subgroups. The focus is typically much narrower in inter-cohort studies. The goal is to identify differences across cohorts and the focus is on differences in percentages or averages (i.e., point estimates) across cohorts. APC studies usually control on basic demographic characteristics that may differ across cohorts – e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, education. Only if cohort studies address a research question that requires comparisons will the relationships between personal characteristics and the outcome of interest be examined. Taking attitudes toward traditional gender roles as an example, most APC studies would examine differences in the percentages of cohort members endorsing traditional gender roles across cohorts, controlling on basic demographic variables. Only if theory suggested that the level of endorsement or the rate at which attitude change occurred differed for men and women would gender contrasts be examined. Thus, both inter-cohort studies and intra-cohort studies pay attention to basic demographic characteristics, but they are typically of more substantive interest in intra-cohort studies.

2.1 A Note on Theory and Processes

A common criticism of APC studies is that they are not tightly linked to solid social science theory. A corollary of this critique is that cohort studies are descriptive rather than explanatory. There is some truth in these criticisms. The reasons that cohort studies are less theory-driven than other areas of research merit consideration. First, the extent to which theory guides APC studies is in part a function of the volume and quality of available theory about social and historical change. With the exception of macro-level theories focused on social and historical changes that are decades in the making such as industrialization and urbanization, theories about more modest social and historical changes are quite rare. Thus, there are few theories on which cohort studies can rest. Second, at the same time that theories focus attention on specific relationships and processes, they deflect attention from other relationships and processes. In the social sciences, a large proportion of theories focus on social reproduction rather than social change. There is abundant evidence that social reproduction occurs in a number of life domains at both the individual and population levels. Indeed, a common theme in this research is to demonstrate that despite what appear to be changes, deeper level structural forces manage to reproduce status hierarchies and the distribution of valuable resources. The commitment to identifying patterns of social reproduction deflects attention from theories that focus on social change.

The extent to which cohort studies are theory-driven, however, is highly variable. Cohort studies addressing four domains of life experience are reviewed below. Well-developed theories form the conceptual bedrock for two of these domains. The two other domains are based on predictions about the amounts and directions of hypothesized social and historical change, but are not linked to solid theoretical frameworks. This variability is representative of cohort studies more broadly. Despite variability in the extent of theoretical justification, we argue that cohort studies in all four domains produce important information about

the changing social and historical contexts within which individual lives unfold.

Another common criticism of APC studies is that even when age, period, and cohort are disentangled, each remains a “black box” which offers little, if any, explanation for the antecedents or meanings of those effects. We argue that this is a false critique. In fact, the processes or mechanisms that explain cohort differences are strong relative to other research traditions. Two processes explain virtually all cohort differences in domains in which cohort differences have been examined: cohort replacement and diffusion. These two processes admittedly do not explain why two individuals from the same birth cohort respond differently to social change – that is the job of intra-cohort studies. These two processes do, however, explain the occurrence of cohort differences.

Cohort replacement, also referred to as *cohort succession*, refers to the straightforward fact that cohorts are in a permanent state of flux as old cohorts die and new cohorts are born. The role of cohort succession in social change was first articulated in classic work by Matilda White Riley (1987). White recognized that social change does not result primarily via changes in attitudes and behaviors in individuals, but rather by the replacement of cohorts whose members share specific attitudes and behavioral tendencies by new cohorts with different attitudes and behavioral preferences. As documented below, if the role of cohort replacement in social change is not carefully examined and estimated, attributions about the causes of social change are often simply wrong. We will see this type of misattribution with regard to the Women’s Movement and its effect on gender egalitarian attitudes. Although the Women’s Movement played a role in changing attitudes about gender roles, the appearance of increasingly egalitarian attitudes over time was largely a result of cohort replacement in which cohorts with more traditional gender attitudes died.

The other primary mechanism resulting in social change is *diffusion*. Cohort replacement focuses on the entrance of new and the exit of old cohorts, demonstrating that most social change

results from “personnel changes” rather than within-individual change. In contrast, diffusion focuses on differences within cohorts in the rate or pace at which social change occurs. Diffusion occurs in a sequence, with early adoption of new attitudes or behaviors by cohort members of high socioeconomic status. Specifically, in early years of observation, SES is strongly and positively correlated with increased support for new attitudes or behaviors; in subsequent years, however, correlations between SES and those attitudes or behavior weaken or disappear. These relationships weaken because large proportions of the younger cohorts endorse the new attitude or implement the new behavior. Thus, persons of high SES tend to be the *avant garde* in social change. Over time the attitude changes are diffused to the broader population.

To demonstrate what studies of cohort differences offer to our understanding of historical and social change, this section provides exemplars of research on four topics. We first examine secularization. Because it rests on a well-articulated theoretical framework and testable hypotheses, secularization is arguably the ideal topic for APC analysis. We then turn to two types of demographic change: cohort size, which represents a cohort characteristic per se and family structure and dynamics, which have exhibited rapid changes over the past few decades. The final domain examined is attitudes, for which we review cohort differences in gender egalitarian attitudes. These topical areas differ in several respects, including the consistency of findings across studies, the strength of cohort differences, the methods used to detect cohort differences, the extent to which studies rest on solid theoretical foundations, and the degree to which the investigators attempt to explain observed cohort patterns.

The summaries of the topical areas are not comprehensive, but illustrative of much larger bodies of research. This is especially true where we use a single attitude as exemplar although we identified cohort studies of more than 40 specific attitudes. We briefly trace the origins of research in the topical areas with emphasis on research published in the twenty-first century. Recent studies are typically based on more sophisticated

techniques for disentangling the effects of age, period, and cohort. In addition, because of their recency, findings from these studies are more likely to generate new research questions about cohort differences and their meaning.

2.2 Secularization: Cohort Changes in Religious Participation and Authority

A dominant issue in the sociology of religion for more than half a century has been secularization. Along with industrialization and urbanization, secularization is viewed as a key component of the transition from the pre-modern to the modern world. These social and cultural processes literally transformed every aspect of human life.

What is secularization? In general terms secularization is the transformation of societies from primary dependence on religious values, authority, and institutions to non-religious – or secular – values, authority, and institutions (Sommerville 1998; Taylor 2007). Scholars differ substantially in conclusions about the extent to which secularization has penetrated modern and postmodern societies. Three dimensions have received most attention. One dimension focuses on *declining rates of participation in religious institutions* as a critical feature of secularization (Schwadel 2010; Sommerville 1998). Rates of membership in religious organizations and regular participation in religious services declined gradually, but markedly over the twentieth century in industrialized societies. A second dimension of secularization is the *decline in the authority* that religious institutions have over individual lives and societies more broadly (Chaves 2011; Voyer 1999). Religious leaders are no longer widely viewed as the final authorities on either private attitudes and behaviors or public policies and regulations. The third dimension of secularization is the *increasing privatization of religion* in the modern world (Lambert 1999). Scholars subscribing to this view argue that declines in participation in religious institutions are only part of the story, and that commitment to religious values and practices remains strong in the non-public sphere.

They also view the increasing proportions of people who describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious” as evidence of a more private, individualized relationship with the sacred. Recent APC analyses have addressed these three dimensions of secularization.

2.2.1 Religious Service Attendance and Beliefs

Without question, attendance at religious services declined precipitously since the first half of the twentieth century in western countries. Two recent APC studies examined attendance data from 1972 to 2006 in the U.S. (Schwadel 2010, 2011) and reported continued decline across cohorts in the early years of the twenty-first century. Year-to-year cohort differences are quite small in absolute terms, but cumulatively they add up to a substantial trajectory of declining attendance. Literally dozens of other studies have documented declines in religious service attendance over much larger numbers of years than the studies by Schwadel. But those studies are not based on APC analyses and, therefore, do not estimate the separate effects of age, period, and cohort.

Declining rates of religious service attendance are not restricted to the U.S. APC analyses of British data covering much of the twentieth century show steady declines in religious service attendance (Crockett and Voas 2006; Voas and Crockett 2005). Using data from ten European countries from 1981 to 2008, Kaufmann and colleagues report cohort-based declines in attendance (Kaufmann et al. 2012). They note that declines have been steeper for cohorts born before 1945; since then, rates of attendance stabilized in younger cohorts, suggesting that further declines (which would result in rates of attendance below 10 %) are unlikely. It is often said that the U.S. is more religious than European countries. This is true in that larger percentages of Americans than Europeans attend religious services once a month or more – a consistent pattern over at least 50 years. But the pattern of declining attendance across cohorts is true of both the U.S. and Europe. Cohort replacement accounts for declining attendance over time.

None of the studies of cohort differences in religious service attendance reported significant age effects. Thus, contrary to popular belief, there is no evidence that individuals become more religious – at least in terms of service attendance – as they age.

Some scholars have speculated that declining rates of religious service attendance have not been accompanied by declines in religious beliefs – a pattern termed “believing without belonging.” Most of the studies that examined APC differences in attendance also examined endorsement of traditional religious beliefs (e.g., belief in the Bible, belief in prayer). In all the relevant studies, religious belief declined to the same degree that attendance did (Crockett and Voas 2006; Kaufmann et al. 2012; Schwadel 2011; Voas and Crockett 2005).

2.2.2 Religious Authority

One dimension of religious authority is the faith of the public in religious leaders. One APC study examined confidence in the leaders of religious organizations for the period of 1973–2010 in the U.S. Confidence in religious leaders was substantially lower during the 1980s than in the years before and since (Hoffman 2013). During the 1980s, several prominent religious leaders made headlines as a result of adultery, child molestation, and embezzlement of church funds. These scandals were accompanied by fairly dramatic declines in confidence in religious leaders. After the 1980s, faith in religious leaders leveled off, albeit at a considerably lower level than before the scandals. The analysis suggests that this pattern was initially a period effect that persisted over time and came to persistently differentiate cohorts exposed to that period effect.

2.2.3 Non-religious Spirituality

Some scholars argue that in the transition from the modern to the postmodern world, highly-individualized forms of spirituality began to replace organized religion as a way for individuals to search for the sacred and for transcendence of the material world. A significant proportion of Americans, for example, describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious.” With data from 14

western countries, including the U.S. and Canada, Houtman and Aupers (2007) examined the spread of non-religious spirituality from 1981 to 2000. Although the time span was only 19 years, a strong and significant pattern of increased spirituality was observed. The rate of increase, however, varied across countries. France, Britain, The Netherlands, and Norway experienced the highest increases; the U.S. and Canada were intermediate; and southern Europe had the lowest rate of increase. Virtually all the differences were explained by cohort replacement.

Taken together, APC studies tell a coherent story of increasing secularization in developed countries over several decades and hint at the emergence of postmodern spirituality. Secularization theory is ideal for APC analyses because it focuses directly on a form of social change best measured at the population level. Cohort differences are overwhelmingly the result of cohort replacement. There is no evidence that individuals whose initial commitments were to organized religion turn to non-religious spirituality at older ages. Secularization is not the result of aging. Rather it is the turnover in cohorts comprising the population that accounts for its expansion.

Questions remain about the dynamics of secularization. Although the effects of cohort succession on religious participation are strong, it also is possible that indicators of secularization exhibit diffusion. We do not know whether reduced participation in religious services, decreased faith in religious leaders, and increased participation in privatized religion occurred first among cohort members of high socioeconomic status and then diffused to the point that SES is no longer associated with secularized behaviors and attitudes. This is a question worthy of investigation, both as a test of diffusion theory and as a means of generating hypotheses about the probabilities of increased secularization as a result of diffusion.

2.3 Demographic Change Associated with Cohort Size

The baby boom lasted from 1946 to 1964 in the U.S. and at approximately the same time in other

Western societies. Indeed, the term “baby boom” was coined to describe these very large birth cohorts. Long before the baby boom, demographers worked with population pyramids which provided graphic depictions of populations based on the age and sex of population members. Thus, social scientists had long histories of studying “age grades.” This was a far cry, however, from acknowledging the conceptually distinct, but empirically tangled concepts of age, period, and cohort. It was the arrival of the baby boom that focused scientific and public attention on cohort size.

The scholar most strongly associated with theory and research on cohort size is Richard Easterlin. Although he published several papers on cohort size during the 1970s, Easterlin’s theory and research on cohort size was best integrated in his book, *Birth and Fortune: The Impact of Numbers on Personal Welfare* (1980, 1987). The central thesis of this book is that members of large cohorts will experience lower well-being than those in smaller cohorts, due primarily to overcrowding in large cohorts. Cohort size is expected to affect multiple dimensions of well-being, including job stability, earnings, marital stability, fertility, crime, life satisfaction or happiness, political alienation, and suicide and other self-damaging behaviors. A corollary of Easterlin’s theory was his insistence that cohort size should be measured as *relative* cohort size. Measuring relative cohort size is important because it provides a continuous measure of cohort size (as compared to categorizing cohorts as large or small), which in turn permits investigators to determine whether there is a dose-response relationship between cohort size and outcomes of interest.

A substantial volume of research between the late 1970s and early 1990s examined Easterlin’s hypotheses about cohort size. Results were mixed, although most studies supported expectations that large cohorts would fare worse than small cohorts. These studies, however, were not based on APC analyses. Thus, they compared cohorts of different sizes, but did not model or control on age and period effects. After the early 1990s, research on cohort size was relatively

dormant until recently. Earlier studies typically examined outcomes with data that spanned the 1950s or early 1960s to the early or mid-1980s. The earliest years examined in recent studies are typically the 1960s through mid-1970s, but extend the period of observation to the early 2000s. Most recent studies also are based on true APC analyses.

A novel outcome in the cohort size literature is underemployment. Slack and Jensen (2008) examined the associations of cohort size and underemployment in the U.S. between 1974 and 2004. Being labeled as underemployed was based on any of four conditions: being unemployed and having given up after an extended job search; being unemployed and actively looking for work; involuntarily working part-time, but desiring full-time work; and working, but earning less than 125 % of the poverty threshold. This paper is based on a true APC analysis and all three factors are significant. The age effect reveals that across cohorts and times of measurement, young adults have significantly higher rates of underemployment than their older counterparts. With regard to period, not surprisingly underemployment rates are highest for all age groups during times of economic recession. The cohort effect is as expected: rates of underemployment are higher for large than for small cohorts at all ages and times of measurement. In addition, education interacted with relative cohort size such that underemployment was especially common for members of large cohorts with less than a high school education. This paper illustrates two important methodological points. First, the authors documented that age, period, and cohort were all significantly related to underemployment. This demonstrates the importance of disentangling APC to the extent possible. Second, testing for interactions between individual characteristics and cohort size yielded significant and meaningful findings.

Recent studies also include research based on non-U.S. samples. Brunillo (2010), for example, examined the relationship between cohort size and earnings using data from 11 European countries. A significant negative relationship between cohort size and personal earnings was observed in all 11 countries, as predicted by the Easterlin

hypothesis. But there was an interesting difference across countries as well. The relationship between cohort size and earnings was higher in southern European countries than in northern countries. Brunillo suggests that this may reflect size of the welfare state. That is, with their more generous welfare state benefits, Northern countries may use public policy to reduce the size of cohort differences.

APC studies of cohort size are relatively unique because they focus on a cohort characteristic rather than the attitudes or behaviors of cohort members. The theoretical foundations for studies of cohort size are relatively strong. Although the Easterlin hypothesis is simple and straightforward it rests on a well-articulated theory that explains why and how cohort size should affect the life chances of cohort members. An advantage of Easterlin's theory is that it predicts that cohort size affects a wide range of outcomes. Not all of the predicted outcomes have been examined using APC analysis – important topics for future research. In addition, some components of Easterlin's theory have not been adequately studied. He hypothesizes that large and small cohorts will "cycle" over time. This implies marked changes in fertility behavior across cohorts. It is not clear whether there is a cycle of cohort sizes over historical time or whether the Baby Boom was historically-unique. Another unaddressed question is whether the smaller cohorts born after an unusually large cohort fare as well as small cohorts that were born just prior to the large cohort. It is possible that the pressures exerted by a large cohort result in more restricted life chances for cohorts following the large cohort than were available to equally small cohorts born before the large cohort. Despite these unanswered questions, studies of the associations between cohort size and various outcomes provide useful information that is unlikely to be revealed in any other way. Several scholars who examined cohort size state explicitly that within-cohort variability accounts for more of the variance in the outcomes than cohort size does. But focusing on what variables "explain" the most variance misses the point. Examining the opportunities and constraints linked to cohort

size provides unique and useful information about, as Easterlin so aptly called it, birth and fortune.

2.4 Demographic Change in Family Structure and Dynamics

Changes in family structure and dynamics are arguably the most visible societal changes in recent decades. Much of the public discourse on family changes focuses on cohabitation and non-marital births. Social scientists also are interested in those issues, but survey the broader landscape of family structure including marriage, divorce, and total fertility. Here we summarize cohort differences in the U.S.; similar differences exist in all western countries.

Sizeable cohort differences in age of marriage have occurred and changed direction since the end of the nineteenth century in the U.S. Age at first marriage between 1890 and 2010 exhibits a U-shaped curve for both men and women. In 1890, the average age at first marriage for men was 26.4 years. Age at first marriage decreased to its lowest level of 24.0 in 1950 and then increased consistently to its highest level of 28.4 in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Corresponding ages for women were 23.5 in 1890, 20.4 in 1950, and 26.8 in 2010. The proportions of Americans who never marry exhibit the same pattern. Thus recent cohorts are significantly more likely than older cohorts to marry at later ages or not marry at all.

Substantial cohort differences in divorce emerged over approximately the past 70 years. Historical events are often accompanied by changes in family structure and dynamics. For example, divorce rates (already low by today's standards) fell precipitously in the years of the Great Depression, then increased substantially at the end of World War II (Schoen and Canudas-Romo 2006). Divorce rates fell somewhat in the 1950s and remained relatively stable until the 1970s. Divorce rates more than doubled during the 1970s, increased more slowly in the 1980s, and have continued to be high (about half of American marriages end in divorce), but rela-

tively stable since 1990 (Raley and Bumpass 2003). These trends are based on times of measurement rather than birth cohorts – and, indeed, cohorts defined by year of divorce include individuals from multiple birth cohorts. Nonetheless, the odds of divorce differ substantially across cohorts and cohort differences map well with period differences, as demonstrated in life table analyses (e.g., Schoen and Canudas-Romo 2006). Note also that although divorce rates have plateaued, marriage rates have declined, thus decreasing the number of divorced individuals in the population.

As rates of marriage decreased and rates of divorce increased over time, rates of cohabitation increased dramatically, especially since 1980. By 2010, almost half of American men and women cohabited before marriage; about half of these relationships culminated in marriage. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the percentages of U.S. women cohabiting at the time of interview increased from 3.0 % in 1985 to 11.2 % by 2006–2010 (Copen et al. 2012). Similar percentages were reported by men. In addition, the average duration of cohabitation increased from less than 2 years in 1985 to nearly 4 years in 2006–2010. In 1980 the vast majority of cohabitating couples had never been married. In the 25 years since then, increasing proportions of cohabiting couples include one or both partners who were previously married and are from earlier cohorts than couples for whom cohabitation is their “first union.” This pattern indicates diffusion from younger to older cohorts over the past 25 years.

Easterlin (1980, 1987) hypothesized that fertility occurs in cycles and that “boom cohorts” will be followed by “bust cohorts.” This hypothesis is supported by changes in fertility rates in the U.S. since the baby boom ended. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the U.S. fertility rate declined continuously until 1990. Between 1990 and 2007, the fertility rate inched upward. Since 2007, the fertility rate declined to its historical low, probably as a reaction to the Great Recession (Livingston and Cohn 2012). One way of describing the size of the fertility rate fluctuations is to examine the total number of children born to

women at different times. In 1910, average number of children/woman age 15–44 was 3.4. Corresponding numbers are as follows: 1930, 2.2 children; 1955, 3.6 children; 1980, 1.8 children; 2000, 2.1 children; and 2011, 1.8 children (Haines 2008; Livingston and Cohn 2012). In addition to Easterlin's hypothesis of fertility cycles, factors believed to contribute to the fertility declines between 1970 and 2007 include increased availability of contraception, legalized abortion, and public concerns about overpopulation.

Although fertility rates declined considerably over the past 50 years, the proportion of non-marital births to total births increased dramatically. Two studies examined cohort differences in rates of non-marital births (rather than reporting period changes). England et al. (2012) examined rates of pre-marital births for women born between 1925 and 1959. The proportions of women giving birth prior to marriage increased consistently across cohorts. Wu (2008) reported cohort differences in non-marital births by age 30 for cohorts born between 1925 and 1969. The proportion of women with non-marital births increased monotonically over time, increasing from 10 % of the 1929 cohort to 25 % of the 1969 cohort. Note that pre-marital births represent a subset of all non-marital births. In more recent years, increases in non-marital births have been even larger. In 1990 28 % of all births were non-marital births; by 2010, non-marital births comprised 41 % of all births.

Without question, family structure changed considerably since the early 1900s – and this is especially true in the more recent past. Although cohort differences in family structure are dramatic, they do not capture within-cohort differences. Each source cited above makes the point that the overall cohort or period differences masked significant within-cohort differences associated with education, race/ethnicity, and nativity. With regard to the latter, for example, women immigrants have the highest fertility rates in the U.S., although nativity differences have narrowed somewhat over the past decade (Livingston and Cohn 2012).

Overall, cohort differences in family structure and dynamics differ from those observed for

indicators of secularization and cohort size in two important ways. First, very few studies of changing family structure are based on true APC analyses. Thus, most estimates of cohort differences in family structure are not as precise or “pure” as estimates in other domains. Second, theoretical foundations for research on the dynamics of family structure are nearly absent. To the extent that investigators speculate about the antecedents of trends in family structure, discussion is typically post-hoc. One common post hoc interpretation of dramatic cohort and period differences in family structure is the tenant that the life course has become increasingly individualized or deinstitutionalized (Dannefer 2011; Mayer 2009). This perspective is too ambiguous to be considered a theory, but it implies that heterogeneity in life course patterns has expanded to the extent that there is – or soon will be – no modal life course which is recognized by societal members as the “right way” to sequence and/or time life transitions.

The combination of the absence of a theoretical framework and the absence of true APC analyses is especially problematic. For example, as noted above, several investigators attribute the recent decline in fertility to the Great Recession. There is precedent for this interpretation based on the very low U.S. fertility rates during the Great Depression. Nonetheless, this interpretation, while offered as an explanation for cohort differences, is logically more likely to represent a period effect. True APC analyses are needed to disentangle the effects of age, period, and cohort and, thus, permit more credible explanations.

Some cohort differences in family structure appear to represent diffusion. Recall that in diffusion, changes in attitudes or behavior occur initially among persons of high socioeconomic status. Then, as changes became widespread in the population, the relationship of SES with attitudes weaken or disappear. With regard to family structure, cohort differences in cohabitation followed a similar pattern (see Bhrolchain and Beaujouan 2013 for a careful analysis of diffusion of cohabitation in Britain). Other changes in family structure, however, appear to involve diffusion from younger to older cohorts. This is

especially true of cohort differences in non-marital pregnancies, which were initially negatively related to SES. Recent increases in non-marital fertility, however, have occurred disproportionately among higher SES women (although non-marital fertility remains more prevalent among low SES women). The conditions under which diffusion is from higher status to lower status population groups vs. those under which diffusion is from lower status to higher status groups merits both theoretical and empirical attention.

2.5 Cohort Differences in Gender Role Attitudes

The public has long-standing interest in the attitudes of societal members and the extent to which attitudes differ for population subgroups. Politicians frequently quote “opinion polls,” which measure attitudes, to show that the public favors their political platforms. Attitudes toward products and services are an essential part of marketing research. And, of course, attitude formation and change are significant issues for social and behavioral scientists. In all of these venues, it is commonplace for attitudes to be compared across age groups and in many instances public attitudes and other phenomena are monitored over time to determine trends.

Age differences and time trends are often explicit concerns in studies of attitudes, but the term cohort is almost never raised in public discourse and is often not addressed in scientific studies. Yet cohort differences are plausible alternate explanations to presumed age or period differences. All comparisons across age groups are also comparisons across cohorts, raising the possibility that these are cohort differences that have nothing to do with age. Similarly, time trends may be period effects; but it also is possible that they reflect the process of cohort replacement. Thus, examining cohort differences in attitudes is essential to permitting valid attributions about the causes of historical change.

2.5.1 Egalitarian Gender Roles

In response to the Women’s Movement in the 1970s, social scientists consistently hypothesize increases over time in attitudes favoring egalitarian gender roles. Related questions include how rapidly and widespread changes were and whether the move toward egalitarianism differed across demographic subgroups. Several studies report increased egalitarianism; each also sheds light on somewhat different issues and used different periods of observation.

There is substantial evidence that support for egalitarian gender roles increased substantially in the U.S. since the mid-1970s based on true APC analyses. Pampel (2011a) reported this based on repeated cross-sectional data obtained between 1977 and 2006 from 86 birth cohorts. Cotter et al. (2011) reported the same general pattern using repeated cross-sectional data from 1974 through 2008, although there was no significant change in attitudes toward gender roles between 1994 and 2008. They suggested that the Women’s Movement generated significant attitude changes across cohorts during its aftermath (Rossi 1985), but that more recent cohorts simply adopted the attitudes of their parents’ cohorts. Cotter and colleagues also document that half of the change in attitudes observed over the 29 years of observation resulted from cohort replacement. That is, half of the increased support for egalitarian gender roles resulted from the deaths of older cohort members who endorsed more traditional gender attitudes.

Similar patterns of attitude change have been observed in non-U.S. samples. Shu and Zhu (2012) examined two specific gender role attitudes using repeated cross-sectional data from China for the period of 1995–2007. For one attitude – that it is appropriate for women to combine family and work roles – there were no age, period, or cohort effects because virtually all study participants strongly endorsed this attitude. Cohort differences were observed for a more general attitude endorsing gender equality in all aspects of life. More recent cohorts endorsed this attitude in greater proportions than older cohorts.

In addition, within cohorts, education, income, and occupational prestige were positively related to more egalitarian attitudes.

Using 14 waves of data from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, Kraaykamp (2012) examined attitudes toward gender egalitarianism in Norway. As in other countries, younger cohorts endorsed egalitarian family roles more than older cohorts. In addition, working women were significantly more likely to endorse egalitarianism than non-working women, although this difference narrowed in recent cohorts.

Finally, Pampel (2011b) examined support for egalitarian gender roles from 1988 to 2002 using data from 19 nations that included 84 cohorts. Again, younger cohorts favored egalitarian gender roles significantly more than earlier cohorts. The positive effect of education on gender role equality first strengthened over time, and then weakened considerably, indicating diffusion. Regardless of cohort, women were more likely than men to endorse egalitarian gender roles.

Evidence of cohort differences in attitudes toward gender egalitarianism is strong and consistent, with younger cohorts endorsing significantly more egalitarian attitudes than older cohorts. In addition, research suggests that women and persons of high socioeconomic status are more likely to endorse egalitarian attitudes than men and persons of lower socioeconomic status, although the SES difference appears to be narrowing as a result of diffusion. Two implications of this research merit note. First, these studies used APC analysis and none of them observed significant age or period effects. Thus there is no evidence that individuals develop more gender egalitarian attitudes as they age. It appears that at least half of the increase in gender egalitarian attitudes is the result of the death of cohorts characterized by more traditional attitudes toward gender roles. Second, and related, much – probably most – research on changes in gender roles and gender attitudes attribute changes to the Women's Movement. Other than APC studies, the literature does not discuss the role of cohort succession in changes in gender attitudes. Because of this, the role of the Women's Movement is exaggerated in most studies of gender roles and attitudes – the

“consciousness-raising” which the Women's Movement encouraged was important, but no more important than cohort replacement.

2.6 Final Thoughts on Inter-cohort Differences

Studies of cohort differences at the population level are valuable because they reveal the overall landscape of a society. APC analyses make it possible to estimate the influence of aging, time of measurement, and cohort differences and each is estimated with the other two effects taken into account. Cohort differences in particular permit observation of social and historical change. Given the many cohort differences observed in the topics reviewed here, social change is endemic. Some social changes are decades in the making; others arise quite rapidly. Given data covering sufficiently long periods of time, the extent and pace of social changes can be observed.

Perhaps the principle of the life course perspective that is most ignored in inter-cohort studies is place – i.e., the ecological contexts within which individual lives unfold. Virtually all APC studies to date rely on national samples. This is true of both U.S. and non-U.S. studies. Yet age, period, and cohort effects are possible for smaller geographic units than the nation state. A case in point is the effects of Hurricane Katrina on life course trajectories. Research suggests that the effects of the disruptions and losses generated by Hurricane Katrina remain strong and pervasive for persons directly affected. There is no evidence, however, that Hurricane Katrina generated cohort and period effects for U.S. citizens living outside the direct path of this natural disaster. Logically, there is no reason that APC studies could not be performed for samples from geographic units other than nations (George 2014). Extending the geographical units to which APC analyses are applied is a high priority for future research.

Although valuable, cohort differences are only one window to the life course – and how it changes over time. In many ways, cohort analysis provides a view of the “forest” of life course patterns; but it is intra-cohort variability that allows

us to see the “trees.” Intra-cohort variability is richer and more finely nuanced than can be revealed in cohort studies – even those that pay attention to within-cohort variation due to sex, race/ethnicity, nativity, and SES. In particular, intra-cohort studies are equipped to trace the varying effects of broad social changes on individual lives. We turn now to intra-cohort variability and how it advances our understanding of the life course.

3 Historical Variation Within Cohorts: Life Course and Developmental Effects

Social change tends to differentiate the life course of adjacent cohorts. However change may also take the form of intra-individual trajectories “within cohorts” that are linked to the cross-cutting statuses of its members, such as those of social class and gender. Even age becomes a source of intra-cohort variation when the birth cohort includes multiple years that indicate differing life or career stages. This link to intra-cohort variation occurs through differential exposure to social change. Ryder (1965, p. 847) refers to the “attractive simplicity” of cohort membership and the potential attenuation of its influence due to such status configurations. In his view, every cohort is “heterogeneous”, and cohort comparisons can be “profitably supplemented by relevant compositional variables”. This intra-cohort perspective is designed for a developmental investigation of social change in life experience.

The cross-cutting statuses of a cohort’s members enable us to solve the puzzle of differential exposure to change – not all members of a cohort are exposed to change, such as a drastic decline of the economy. And exposure is not uniform as to its impact. During severe economic declines in the industrialized world, such as the Great Depression, the risk of unemployment was highest among workers in the lower strata, and particularly among males. Employment was especially problematic among both young and older workers. In other national crises, such as mobilization for WW II in the United States, the

risk of being drafted in 1944 was experienced by males, single or married, between the ages of 18 and 35. Cross-cutting statuses among cohort members thus focus attention on high and low risk subgroups of cohorts in terms of the change at hand.

The temporal frame of a birth cohort extends in theory across the life span, and a similar perspective is called for in considering the duration of the social change in question and its life course effects, whatever the data limitations on available measurements. For example, the first half of the 1930s decade include the peak years of the economic decline in the Great Depression. However in the United States only mobilization for World War II brought an end to the prolonged economic hardship of the working class population. We know more about families and children during the first half of the 1930s when longitudinal data were available on economic adaptations than during the late 1930s. The long view of birth cohorts from the 1920s shows a historical path that included the urban prosperity of the 1920s, the hard times of the 1930s, and the challenges of the years marked by world war, postwar development, and the end of an era of affluence, circa 1974. The full impact of this life course journey is beyond the scope of any study, but it is important to be aware of the lifelong historical context, its continuities and disjunctures.

In what follows, we use empirical studies of three historical changes in the United States – Great Depression, World War II, and the decline of the rural farm population – to illustrate an intra-cohort perspective that investigates the influence of social change on the gendered life course trajectories of cohort members. We begin with birth cohorts from opposite ends of the 1920s (the Oakland and Berkeley studies, birth-dates of 1920–1921 and 1928–1929 – Elder 1999). They encountered Depression hardships at different times in their lives as well as World War II. The younger Berkeley men experienced World War II as adolescents and were typically mobilized into military service after the war had ended, whereas nearly all of the Oakland men served in the Second World War and returned to civilian life with access to the educational

benefits of the GI Bill in the booming postwar era. Older recruits with marriages and jobs experienced the greatest degree of disruption in their lives. The later the entry, the greater the risk of a disrupted life course.

The third historical change involves the declining rural farm population in the United States. The prosperity of the postwar era was followed by an expansion of agricultural production to the point of excess in the declining market of the 1980s recession. This economic crisis prompted outmigration from farm states, such as Iowa. In 1989, a research team (Conger and Elder 1994) launched a longitudinal study of families and their young adolescent members. The latter are members of a cohort born at the end of the 1970s who grew up during the rural economic crisis of the 1980s. Their families span a wide range of ties to the land, from full-time farming to families that had recently lost their farm, to those that left the farm some years ago and those with fathers who were born in an urban environment.

3.1 Living Through Depression and War

Children of the Great Depression (1974/1999) documents the importance of locating members of longitudinal studies in their birth cohort and historical context, taking note of their developmental trajectories and social histories. The Oakland and Berkeley study members were born at opposite ends of the 1920s and consequently experienced the same historical times – whether economic depression, war, or postwar prosperity – at different life stages in their gendered roles and class origin. Their particular sequence of different historical times from childhood to mid-life identifies distinctive life histories. In what follows we depict this sequence in life course development through World War II and into the postwar era.

One of the most impressive comparative intra-cohort studies was carried out by Ingrid Schoon (2006) in Great Britain. The United Kingdom has led the way in launching national longitudinal studies that invite comparative cohort studies,

and Schoon compared two cohorts with birth dates of 1958 and 1970. Building on Children of the Great Depression and other research, she designed a comparative intra-cohort study of economic deprivation in life course development that spans 40 years and includes data on the major economic recessions of the early 1980s and 1990s. The last adult comparison of the two cohorts at the same age occurred when the study members of the cohorts were in their early 30s. Though socioeconomic disadvantage was more common among young people born in 1958, the study found that growing up in a disadvantaged environment had more adverse life course effects on members of the younger cohort. This may be due to the more vulnerable developmental age of this cohort in the severe recession of the 1980s. Another possible factor is the increasing skill requirements of middle class employment that enhanced the penalty of disadvantaged origins.

Ongoing longitudinal studies of this kind provide the possibility of periodic studies that build upon prior research on cohort trajectories. And in fact, it was this option that enabled the identification of cohort pathways through the Great Depression and World War II for the Oakland and Berkeley study members. But it is the dramatic growth of national longitudinal studies that represents the most exceptional opportunity for the comparison of cohorts on social change effects “over the life course”. Examples include the National Longitudinal Surveys in the United States and especially the pioneering national longitudinal cohorts in the United Kingdom, from the 1946 cohort to 1958, 1970, 2000, and 2011. The ecological diversity of societal populations calls attention to the importance of taking this variation into account in national longitudinal cohorts.

When the 1920s came to an end, the Oakland children were completing grade school, while some of the last additions to the Berkeley cohort had just arrived in their families. The economic times seemed good overall and revealed no sign of the impending crisis, though it soon became a reality over the next 3 years for most of the Oakland and Berkeley families. Among the economically deprived (a loss greater than a third of 1929 income up to 1933) mounting pressures

ignited family tensions and conflicts, especially in families with a history of troubles. The younger boys in the Berkeley study were most often exposed to the arbitrary and punitive behavior of father, an abuse that undermined their self-confidence and sense of independence. The younger girls were shielded from this abuse by their mothers.

The Oakland boys, by contrast, were old enough to hold paid jobs in the community and to help out at home. More of their time out of school was spent with friends away from parental supervision. They were also old enough to understand the economic troubles their parents were having. Most girls in this cohort assumed major responsibilities in deprived households and some also held paid jobs. During their years of physical maturation, they tended to feel less attractive and popular. It is noteworthy that other studies (Elder and Caspi 1990; 226) document a life stage difference in the vulnerability of boys and girls to environmental insults that corresponds with these cohort findings on developmental risk. Boys tend to be more vulnerable during childhood, whereas girls are more vulnerable in adolescence. However neither the Oakland girls nor the boys show psychological effects of economic hardship by graduation from high school. The boys were soon called to military duty and the girls entered the work force or college.

The Berkeley study members were leaving elementary school for junior high in a community that was soon to be mobilized for World War II. War mobilization became the ecology of adolescence for the Berkeley cohort – with block wardens, darkened windows at night, frequent collection drives involving young people, and the constant flow of troop trains and ships to piers in San Francisco Bay. The work demands for employed parents in defense-related jobs increased significantly across a 24 h day, minimizing the daily contact of parents and children. In these ways, the war years further weakened the role of fathers in the lives of their children. But the perceived manliness of military life and the stature of servicemen appealed to the Berkeley boys who grew up in deprived families in which the mother had taken charge (Elder 1986). In

assessments during adolescence, these boys were judged significantly less ambitious, self-confident, and self-directed than the Oakland boys at the same age. The Berkeley girls were spared this developmental outcome, owing to the protective nurturance of their mothers. They were notably more self-confident, ambitious and energetic than the Oakland girls.

The historical paths of the Oakland and Berkeley men from the 1920s to the postwar era were distinguished by experiencing hard times and wars at different ages, a difference in timetable that made a difference in their lives. The Oakland men experienced adolescence across the economically depressed years of the 1930s and then were called to military service in the armed forces. With few exceptions, they used their veteran's benefits to advantage by acquiring further training and higher education. In contrast, the early childhood years of the Berkeley cohort were shaped by the uncertainties and stress of Depression hardship, a disruptive time of heightened marital tensions, punitive discipline, and resource scarcities. A number of these children grew up without self-assurance, goals or a sense of personal worth. Their wartime adolescence may have reinforced this sense of incompetence as well as their perception of military service as a possible "bridge to opportunity."

World War II was winding down when the Berkeley males were old enough to serve, but three out of four eventually joined the military and a substantial number served in the Korean War of the early 1950s. As might be expected, the boys who chose a military occupation in 1943–1944 were most likely to enter before the age of 21. This action had much to do with a background of "disadvantage" that motivated their joining at the earliest possible age. The military offered them a path to greater opportunity through advanced education and a good job, and it was open to young men who did not have an exemplary educational record or the economic resources for college. Two-thirds of the Berkeley veterans with a deprived family origin and below average grades entered the service at the earliest possible age (Elder 1986); a percentage that dropped to insignificance when neither factor was present.

The Berkeley men who entered the military at an early age were more likely to escape their life history of disadvantage along this path when compared to the later entrants and the non-veterans. They were more likely to at least enter college than the non-veterans, owing in part to the educational benefits of the GI Bill, and this educational path enabled them to make the best use of their personal resources in education and work lives. This occurred in large part through the personal assets they acquired in military service, such as the self-discipline to cope with adversity and leadership skills. With these and other resources, military service turned out to be more predictive of occupational attainment through higher education among men from deprived families in the 1930s than among the non-deprived. At mid-life the men from deprived Berkeley families closely resembled the occupational status of the Oakland men from deprived families.

But how did this achievement occur in the lives of men who were so unpromising in adolescence. According to assessments, they lacked ambition, goals and self-confidence. Relevant insights come from evidence of personal change during military service. In adolescence, the Berkeley men who did not enter the military scored notably higher on psychological competence than the early military entrants – as measured by indexes of self-inadequacy, goal orientation, social competence, and submissiveness. However, by the age of 40 this difference in psychological well-being and competence faded to insignificance. The men from deprived families who entered the military as soon as they were old enough had made up their deficit in psychological competence. The precise mechanisms of such personal change are unknown, except that the veterans talked about this change in postwar interviews. They believed that they had learned to manage wartime stresses and noted that this skill had served them well in difficult situations. A medic in the Berkeley study recalled his trying experience on the front line, caring for the severely wounded and dying. “I managed to show a good deal of courage and good judgment. For the first time in my life, I knew I could handle extreme situations”.

This developmental path owes much to the men’s timely transition to military service. Most of the early entrants in the Berkeley cohort joined the military before marriage, college, and a substantial career investment. They typically entered college after their service and thereby had access to educational funds provided by the GI Bill. Their post-military timing of marriage and careers avoided the disruptive effect of military service, such as long separations and frequent residential change. For a picture of this disruptive effect, consider men who entered military service late in life during World War II (Elder et al. 1994). They are members of a gifted sample of California men who were born between 1903 and 1920, known as the Stanford-Terman project. A large number of the men were mobilized into World War II at a late age, beyond the ages of 30–32. The men were first surveyed in 1922 and data collections continued every 5 or so years up to the 1990s.

Mobilization after the age of 32 markedly increased the risk of personal and social disadvantages that persisted up to late life. Their education level exceeded that of other veterans, but they ended up with a significantly higher divorce rate. The men also tended to experience a disappointing work life and income trajectory after the mid-40s to retirement, particularly in the professional class. Their physical health also declined after the age of 50, a misfortune not associated with combat exposure. And not surprisingly, the late entrants were less inclined to report benefits associated with their service experience.

Our focus on the developmental trajectories of Americans born in cohorts at opposite ends of the 1920s has underscored the complexity and pay-off of linking their lives to the economic collapse of the 1930s and then to mobilization in the Second World War with the economic boom it generated. The life course impact of Depression hardship for a younger or older birth cohort could not be adequately assessed without taking into account its path through war mobilization in the early 1940s, as well as the cross-cutting statuses of age as life stage, class and gender. They all shaped the impact of exposure to the change in question.

The Berkeley males illustrate this complexity. As young children of preschool age in the early years of the Depression, they tended to experience the greatest disadvantage of Depression hardship through harsh punishment and the loss of a caring father. Though lacking ambition and goals after high school, they were soon swept up in the military mobilization of the Second World War. However the major battles had been fought before they could be recruited. Nevertheless nearly three out of four entered the service by the early 1950s.

The early military joiners were influenced developmentally by the challenging training demands and service roles they experienced. By the time they completed their military service and their education, they appeared to have changed in many respects. They were more self-directed, confident, and agentic. For these young men, their developmental life course had been turned around. A legacy of impairment from “a hard times childhood” had been replaced by a beneficial legacy of military service.

3.2 Moving Off the Land

The Great Depression and World War II sent a major shock through the life course of successive cohorts. Another major shock occurred 50 years later in the 1970s when a soaring world demand for agricultural commodities led to overproduction in the United States as market demand declined during the economic recession of the early 1980s. Heavy indebtedness and declining land values began to push families off their farms, setting in motion the most severe rural economic crisis in the Midwestern state of Iowa since the Great Depression, a crisis that accelerated the long-term historic movement of Americans out of farming. Twenty percent of Iowa’s farms did not survive this difficult time.

The impact of this economic crisis on rural Midwestern families and the lives of their children provides an intergenerational example of a “within cohort” perspective on rural socioeconomic change in the life course. The Iowa Youth and Family Study (Conger and Elder 1994) was launched in

1988–1989 to investigate this economic crisis in families with a young adolescent and a near sib. The seventh graders (N=451) represent members of a birth cohort defined by birth at the end of the prosperous 1970s. They grew up during the farm crisis of the 1980s, completed high school in 1994 and have been followed into their 1930s. All of the families resided in eight agricultural counties of the north central region of the state.

The Iowa cohort is differentiated along a family gradient from farm to nonfarm of family types in the economic crisis as of 1989. Approximately 30 % of the fathers were still engaged in farming and represented survivors at the end of the 1980s, although the psychological cost was often high. Some of the fathers worked off their land as did a majority of their wives. A number of men had farmed earlier in the 1980s but we see them in 1989 as a casualty of the economic crisis. During the decade they lost their farms through bankruptcy. These displaced farmers represent 13 % of all fathers in the study and their average family income is a third lower than that of the farmers. The remaining comparison group includes families headed by men who grew up on a farm but then followed a nonfarm career, and families headed by men with a continuous history outside farming.

The men who retained their farms despite a very hard struggle were critical of their “way of life” that was so damaging to family life and health. Survival of the family farm often required long days from both parents. The off-farm employment of both partners became an important factor in family survival in farming. But the psychological impact of losing the family farm stands out above all stressors among the Iowa families, especially among the fathers. One of the fathers who had to give up his family farm was asked about recent life changes. He referred to this loss even though he had lost his North Dakota farm over 7 years ago. His wife reminded him that the question asked for “recent changes” and that the Dakota farm was not a recent loss (Conger and Elder 1994; 81). He replied that it didn’t seem that long ago.

Despite the emotional pain and hardship of the crisis years, a follow-up of the study children in

high school did not find significant evidence of an adverse legacy from such experience (Elder and Conger 2000). Even the most troubled youth in the past – those in families that lost their farm – showed no unusual distress at this time. Farm families had been on a downward income trend over this time, but their sons and daughters and even those from displaced farm families were among the athletic, social, and academic leaders by the time they entered high school. Family socioeconomic status did not account for this outcome.

Access to a socially resourceful path through high school made the difference in their lives. Parent investment in their future was especially relevant. Parents with ties to the land were active supporters of their children's school-based activities, from academics and dramatic arts to athletics. "Family connections" also emerged as an important factor. It refers to the shared family life in farming –working together and more generally the routine of "doing things together." The interdependence of family life on a farm generates a sense of being counted on in daily chores and the harvests. Another distinctive feature of family resourcefulness involved the engagement and leadership of farm parents in community life –in church, civic organizations, schools and economic organizations. Their children frequently followed the parental example through leadership in student organizations.

What is it about socially engaged families that contributes to the educational success and leadership of their children? Typically these farm families are intact and have better educated parents, but the enterprise of farming itself is itself family-based, a theme that carries over to community, church, and school involvement, regardless of educational level. Socially-engaged parents know more about issues that pertain to their children, and the latter realize that what they do matters a lot to parents and grandparents. On the farm and even in the community, social life and work life are shared experiences. Not all farm families were characterized by this interdependence and emotional connectedness, but most were.

This account of Iowa farm families stands in sharp contrast to the urban Berkeley deprived families and the children who were born in 1928–1929.

The work lives of Berkeley fathers were generally carried out some distance from their households, and much of their children's non-school time occurred away from parental observation. Most important is the stronger authority position of the Iowa farm fathers when compared to the Berkeley fathers. The hierarchy of social stratification was less differentiated among farm families. They varied in wealth but not as much in life style.

Lastly, consider the issue of size of community. The Berkeley children came of age in a relatively large community with corresponding social institutions, such as schools. By contrast, the Iowa cohort came of age in communities, schools, and churches that were small by comparison. Small worlds tend to maximize participation opportunities for the young and many of the Iowa youth from hard pressed farm families discovered confidence-building opportunities in their schools. An Iowa boy's family lost its land and livestock in the Great Farm Crisis, but he discovered a turning point in school theatre with the recognition, support, and opportunities it provided. In his words, "Drama ... changed my life. It gave me the confidence to speak in front of groups" and then led to other opportunities, including a university scholarship (Elder and Conger 2000; 182). A supportive family provided an important foundation for this life change.

These social themes emerged from a study focused on young people in families with ties to the land, but they are by means exclusive to them. This younger generation grew up in families that were faced with the constant uncertainty of a livelihood in farming. Though some were still attracted to the possibility of living on a farm, they did not see a future in farming. In this way, the Farm Crisis of the 1980s added fuel to the historic decline of the farm population in the United States.

4 The Impact of Life Course Change

In *Children of the Great Depression*, the effects of economic hardship are traced through the lives of adolescents to their middle years. In an early

review of this work (1975; 121), historian John Modell suggests that social change in the life course establishes a new context for cohort trajectories and for members of the cohort itself. The process follows a dialectical dynamic in which social change influences the life course of individual members of the cohort, followed by the “way that those individual experiences are aggregated to constitute a new context for others living through these changes” (Modell 1989; 22). In this way, life course change represents the emergence of a society that is new in some or many features. Accordingly, this perspective views the Oakland and Berkeley cohorts as “collective actors” that shape their world for subsequent cohorts.

The following cases from American history provide examples of contexts shaped by life course change and the trajectories and transitions that emerged from them. We begin with the lives of young people patterned by the Civil Conservation Corps of the New Deal. Through its training, the CCC established a path to military service in World War II. Next and more broadly considered, we view the cohort of men born in the 1920s as Depression children and then military recruits in World War II. The service time of these recruits established a new life context that provided access to the generous educational benefits of the G.I. Bill with financial support for advanced education that in turn motivated the extraordinary civic involvement of non-black veterans in postwar America. By contrast, black veterans focused most of their civic energies on the achievement of their rights as American citizens in the Civil Rights Movement. Most of these linkages and life contexts varied by gender and race.

Depression youth who were “out of school and work” illustrate the agentic role of a social aggregate when their increasingly dire circumstances prompted federal action through the Civil Conservation Corps of Roosevelt’s New Deal (Leuchtenburg 1964; especially p. 109). Perhaps inspired by manpower development experiences in World War I, CCC camps were established and managed by the Army throughout the country to ‘instill martial virtues in the nation’s youth’.

“CCC recruits convened at army recruiting stations; traveled to an army camp where they were outfitted in World War I clothing; were transported to the woods by troop-train; fell asleep in army tents to the strain of ‘Taps’ and woke to ‘Reveille.’” Despite concern over military control and militarism in this mobilization, the program was praised for its role of shepherding the nation’s youth as war shadows darkened in Europe. By late 1940, the onset of a selective service program across the country prompted a wave of CCC enlistees.

Most of the 16 million Americans who served in World War II came from the cohort of men born in the 1920s. Four out of five men born during the decade became veterans of this war. In the Oakland cohort, birthdates of 1920–1921, virtually all of the men served—only 10 % did not. The military induction of youth who grew up in the Depression decade enabled a good many to escape impoverished backgrounds, dysfunctional families, and problematic academic records. As Brotz and Wilson (1946) described the process, military entry “knifed-off” the past through basic training that fostered equality and comradeship among the recruits. The enormous scope of such training and the global diversity of military service posed an unparalleled challenge at War’s end, that of incorporating military personnel back in civilian society with resources and opportunities for a productive and fulfilling life. The G. I. Bill of Rights emerged with the genius to a remarkably successful transition from soldier to citizen.

No recruit in this ‘Greatest Generation’ could have imagined the extraordinary benefits of this G.I. Bill of Rights that had yet to be proposed in the Congress and its transforming effect on their postwar lives. Nearly half of all men from the 1920s who served in the Armed Forces used the educational benefits of the G.I. Bill, a figure that was more than twice the congressional estimate. Other veterans chose instead to get on with a job instead of more training or education. In *Soldiers to Citizens*, Suzanne Mettler (2005) tells the story of how this legislation came to be and its powerful impact on the veterans who put it to use in their training, higher education and life.

Her pioneering study is based on surveys, both retrospective and prospective, of veterans. Like the composition of the Armed Forces at the time, the respondents were mainly white men, along with small samples of African-American men and women.

Motivated by the all too meager provisions for veterans of the First World War, the American Legion became a vigorous advocate of generous and inclusive benefits during the Second World War and mobilized to ensure congressional support in 1944. The resulting legislation was shaped in part by a proposal from the Roosevelt administration, along with Legion support. The legislation's content was influenced by a soldier's request to his Legionnaire father regarding postwar benefits. When prodded on this issue by his father, he and his buddies replied that they simply wanted the opportunity to 'get education or training, and to find work'. This request eventually became key components of the evolving G.I. Bill. Along with unemployment benefits and access to low-interest housing loans, the G.I. Bill offered educational benefits up to 48 months for veterans with at least 3 months of service. Tuition and fees were covered up to a maximum of \$500, along with a monthly subsistence that varied according to dependents.

Veterans born in the 1920s became a large part of what Robert Putnam (2000) called the "most civic generation" in American history. Their civic involvement may reflect in part the impact of basic training with its emphasis on team work and social responsibility – an interdependence expressed in the shared belief in military units that "you have my back and I have yours". The linked lives in a perspective on the life course thus represent a cornerstone of military training. Ties to comrades are known to persist across the years and are often expressed in reunions (Elder and Clipp 1988). The power of this social bond in postwar America stems in part from the large number of men and women who served in the Second World War – a total exceeding 16 million. When veterans returned to their home communities after the war, they did so usually with other veterans who often became members of their social networks.

The rising level of education in postwar America also contributed significantly to its civic culture, and the flood of returning veterans was a major component of this growth. Over half of the college students enrolled in 1947 were veterans, and a majority of those in Mettler's survey of the Class of 1949 made use of the G.I. Bill in doing so. Its generous benefits became a major turning point in their lives. Most claimed that they would not have been able to afford college or more training without such assistance. The most common beneficiaries of this benefit were veterans who came from lower-income families who used it to pursue vocational/technical training that enabled them to both work and continue their training. These men were two and a half times more likely to use education benefits than men who entered college with such assistance. This differential between college and training partly reflects the smaller number of veterans who were qualified for higher education at this time.

The extraordinary civic involvement of the postwar generation also owes much to its "years of experience with a caring government" (Mettler 2005). The 1920s birth cohort of veterans was exposed to federal government in the 1930s and 1940s that was actively involved in responding to the needs of its citizens through social provisions. For returning veterans, G.I. Benefits for education and training represented by far the most influential aspect of such experience for civic involvement. The generosity and inclusiveness of the benefits fostered a desire to make their lives count in community service. These benefits markedly increased their civic involvement well beyond the effects of education. It is noteworthy that the recipients of training from lower-income families were more likely to make use of this resource in civic activity when compared to the recipients of a college education. With these developments in mind, Mettler (p. 11) concludes that "just as the G.I. Bill transformed the lives of veterans who used it, they in turn helped to change America."

The story of the G.I. Bill is largely centered on male veterans, and yet a full appreciation of its benefits leads to the larger framework of the family and generations. A substantial number of the

male veterans were married when they used the G.I. Bill for access to support for the unemployed, for assistance in paying college or training expenses, and for access to a loan to purchase a home. The veterans interviewed by Suzanne Mettler (2005) spoke about their gratitude for what its benefits meant for their families. Veterans who entered college or technical training programs as the first family member to follow this path established a higher standard of educational achievement for their children.

A relatively small number of women served in the U.S. Armed Forces, and those who did were less likely than male veterans to apply for benefits of the G. I. Bill. As one of the women who did serve noted, this benefit was commonly thought to be “for the men”. A postwar cultural emphasis on homemaking strengthened this theme. But those who did take advantage of the educational benefit were more likely than the non-users to obtain at least some college or training. And, similar to the men, the women who took advantage of the G.I. Bill were more likely to become civic activists.

Gender clearly played a major role in structuring military service and access to the G. I. Bill in the 1920s birth cohort. But gender differences were less pronounced than the striking contrast by race (Mettler 2005; Parker 2009). African American men were barred from major roles in World War II, though a large number served – approximately one million, typically in support for frontline troops. They reported being fairly treated on benefit access and in college or training experience, but not at all in the labor market. Experience in the military empowered returning veterans to act on their own behalf and gave them a sense of agency and equality in claiming the rights of an American citizen. This outlook clashed in the segregated South with mistreatment by employers and public officials. Such actions and the denial of voting rights became intolerable, especially for those who had received a college education on the G.I Bill.

One of the Tuskegee Airmen (Mettler 2005; 140–41) noted that when they came home “you couldn’t even be buried in the town cemetery, you had to be segregated. – you were treated like

a second-class citizen. That was painful, very painful.” By the early 1960s, the cumulative experience of racial injustice had prompted greater involvement of black veterans in street demonstrations, protests, and marches in the civil rights movement. Mettler found that over a third of the African Americans in her sample who used the educational benefits of the G. I. Bill were involved in such mobilizations between 1950 and 1964, with many in leadership roles, compared to 8 % of the black nonusers.

5 Conclusion

This chapter brings to mind the progress achieved in recent decades toward a greater understanding of age, cohorts and the life course, coupled with recognition of the challenges that lie ahead. Over 50 years ago, Norman Ryder brought to publication a field-shaping essay that provided a conceptual framework for investigating social change in society by using an inter-cohort approach. This was soon followed by advances in an age/period/cohort design that enabled research to identify the most important sources of change, whether due to aging, historical time, or cohort membership. More recently progress has been made in finding ways to use theory and observations to explain the observed cohort or period effects.

Ryder’s essay also noted that social change may influence cohort members “differentially” by their gender, age, and social class – an intra-cohort dynamic. As pointed out in this chapter, this perspective can illuminate how a changing society influences the individual over his or her life course. And the aggregation of such life course effects provides insight on the changing trajectory and form of social change. Such work is underway in many regions of the globe, encouraged by the continued growth of cohort studies that follow people over their lives through panel research and retrospective life histories. These studies have produced a more generalized case for recognizing that all projects and their findings are bounded by a specific historical time and place. But we too seldom know whether the findings are generalizable or indicate a trajectory of

change. More comparative cohort studies are needed to advance our understanding of social change in the life course.

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