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Generational research: between historical and sociological imaginations

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In an overview of the history of post war British sociological research Mike Savage traces a transition from what he describes as a 'gentlemanly sociology' – normative in intention drawing on narrative and secondary sources – to a technical and empirical project employing the new methods of the interview and the survey. The latter, he suggests, abandoned an evolutionary project of relating past and present to a focus on the now and emergent change – identified from a unique body of data generated anew. This methodological revolution was associated with a rise in post-war sociology as a discipline and the evolution of dedicated funding sources and publishing outlets. Where sociology had previously been a synthetic knowledge project, informed by a range of 'social sciences' as well as humanities and literary traditions, it became a distinctive paradigm that privileged the 'internal inspection of a unitary or linked data set' rather than comparing disparate sources. Savage characterises the resulting discipline as taking nothing for granted, refusing conventional normative framings and respecting the everyday and ordinary. He also argues that this new emphasis on the generation of original data went hand in hand with a drive to 'abstraction' taking individuals and communities out of the physical landscape and placing them within newly forged social landscapes within which trends could be discerned 'allowing history to be arrayed by manipulating aspects of a singular data source, hence wrenching the present out of a necessarily separated, and therefore fraught relationship with past sources' (2010:237). This move was also associated with the rise of systematic methods allowing for rigorous comparison and new ethical concerns to 'protect anonymity, to champion confidentiality, to avoid making value judgements on their samples' – a practice that Savage controversially suggests allows the social sciences to 'systematically conceal their own tracks' (2010: 237).

Savage's characterisation has been contested, in terms of detail, interpretation and emphasis (Pahl 2011, Crow 2012) and alternative histories of British Sociology (Scott and Bromley 2013). Yet his obituary for sociology's romance with abstraction (which reached its zenith in the 1960s) is compelling. We seem to be in the grip of a turn to time within social research, that can be seen in play in social theory (for example Abbott 2001, Adam 2004, Grosz 2004, 2005) as well as an interest in privileging the temporal dimension of phenomena in empirical research (Edwards 2008, McLeod and Thomson 2009). The widespread revival of C Wright Mills' 1959 manifesto for a sociological imagination that animates the space between biography and history resonates with interest on either side of the disciplinary lines of history and sociology in sharing sources, methods and insights (Scott and Nilsen 2013). Yet there is also something uncanny about this moment of heightened historical sensitivity – inflected by nostalgia for a knowledge projects almost past, most acutely savoured in their dying embers. For Emma Uprichard the current turn to time is part and parcel of the 'empirical crisis' in British sociology associated by the growth in transactional data and an expansion of the 'now' that both heightens the significance of the indexical (the 'time-space stamp' attached to all digital data) while also deluging us with so much spontaneous information that the possibility of gaining temporal perspective outside the immediate is increasingly difficult. She observes the emergence of a 'sticky sociological imagination, which maintains the status quo and

keeps us in tighter traps in a series of recursive presents' (2012: 131). Where the modernist project of sociology has been future oriented, with its 'back to the past', we appear to be drawn into the imperatives of 'now-casting' using 'real-time data'.

In this context there is something very impressive and disruptive about historically oriented sociology of Julia Brannen, which works in the modern sociological tradition in order to contribute to an understanding of lived historical time. In this short paper I will reflect on Brannen's important contribution to the study of generation, drawing attention to the methodological dimensions of the work. As a strategy for encouraging reflection on the relationship between sociological and historical research methods, I place Brannen and colleague's 4 generation study of family change (Brannen et al. 2004) in conversation with social historian Angela Davis's project exploring women and the family in England between 1945 and 2000 (Davis 2012). My aim is both to appreciate Julia Brannen's contribution to the development of theory and methods for intergenerational research as well as reflecting on cross-disciplinary tensions and synergies within the fields of family sociology and women's history.

Researching generation:

Within the social sciences research that engages with the idea of generation takes a range of forms. Most commonly it refers to 'cohort' – a term coined to refer to 'the aggregate of individuals who experienced the same event within the same time interval' (Ryder 1965: 845, cited in Vogt 2013). Cohorts are made visible in studies that follow individuals born in the same year (birth cohort), over time – enabling a disentangling of life stage and cohort and historical effects. A famous example is Glen Elder's (1974) Children of the Depression study that demonstrated the subtle interplay of timing, situation and resources. However cohorts can be defined in terms other than age, so for example my own research captured the experience of a generation of women who became first time mothers in the same year, yet who entered this transition at different stages of the life course, their ages ranging from 15 – 48 (Thomson et al. 2011). The key to cohort based research is a focus on synchronicity and an interest in shared historical location and resources. Mannheim's (1952) classic sociological essay on generation refers to cohorts, who share a common historical position within childhood and adolescence, even though they may be located within distinctive 'generational units' shaped by shared cultural and economic conditions

Gunhilde Hagestad (2013) encourages us to preserve the term 'generation' for the naming of vertical connections within families. The empirical investigation of this kind of generational relationship has been the territory of life history and biographical methods – an interdisciplinary space allowing collaboration between sociologists, oral historians, psychotherapists and those interested in narrative. Within this tradition methods are often, though not exclusively, qualitative - involving interviews, oral testimonies and life histories with the unit of analysis conceived as the chain or the family with the views of multiple members sought to build up a dense and complex account. A distinctive characteristic of this research is the way in which intimate psychological processes are understood to be implicated in wider historical processes. An important example here is the project of Gabrielle Rosenthal and colleagues who adapted family therapy methods to explore the experience of the Holocaust over 3 generations in 20 differently positioned families including those identified as both victims and perpetrators in pursuit of the question 'how is the past dealt with in the individual's biographical construction and in the family dialog?' (1998: 5). Their approach

involved comparisons of families in West Germany, East Germany and Israel, gaining insight into a historical event from multiple perspectives and tracing the legacy of these histories within the present.

These two approaches to the study of generation are not mutually exclusive. Generational approaches to the study of family life can for example define their samples in order to represent distinct birth cohorts. So for example Nielsen and Rudberg's (1994) study of 22 family chains of Norwegian women mapped onto a study of 3 birth cohorts with the grandmothers born between 1910 – 27, the mothers born between 1940-48 and the daughters born between 1971-2. However the selection of chains is more complex than it may initially appear, demanding that we make choices about whether we follow maternal or paternal lines, and in which generation we 'anchor' the sample.

A sociology of the past?

In their study entitled 'caring and working over twentieth century' Julia Brannen and colleagues propose that an empirical account of 12 'beanpole' families can be a route into larger historical questions that encompass 'the vast panopticon of social change that has occurred in Britain over the 20c' (2004:1).

"Our great-grandparents, in the early part of their lives, live through Hobsbawm's Age of Catastrophe and Rose's emergent social state; our grandparents, during the same early years of their lives, are witness to the post-war Golden Age and the full flowering of the social state; while our parents come to adulthood in a new age of crisis, accompanied by the resurgence of economic and political liberalism' (2004:24)

The beanpole family (with 4 generations alive) is itself a historically contingent phenomenon – a consequence of greater life expectancy. At the same time the erosion of the British welfare in state since the 1980's has fuelled a heightened awareness of generational dynamics including the identification of a 'pivot generation' who are faced with simultaneous responsibility for dependent children and parents. By constructing a sample anchored in this middle 'pivot' generation, the researchers relate the small histories of families with bigger histories of post war Britain. Brannen and colleagues understand that their historical sensibility is not typical of a social science community 'governed by present concerns and assumptions' and with its "face set towards the present and its back to the past" (Fielding 2004, cited in Brannen et al. 2004).

The authors explain that intergenerational relations are 'difficult to research, creating challenges for research design and analysis' (2004:210). They work with multiple meanings of time: time present (how the present shapes the telling of the past), life course time (the interpretive contexts available to subjects depending on age and position in the generational hierarchy) and generational time (what is said and unsaid). The aim is not to map family generations against historical periodisations, 'while such grand designs are helpful in constructing a context for individual narratives' historical conditions 'do not determine everything and everyone' but affect 'lives differently according to the experiences and life chances, including those of the families to which they belong.' (2004:24). When studied in fine detail 'generational change is not linear, smooth or uniform' (2004: 203).

The core methods employed in this study are biographic narrative interviews, which in their hermeneutic orientation provide a framework within which the multiple dimensions of time in play can be recognised. Brannen and colleagues are explicit that this involves 'epistemological tensions between realism and interpretivism' (2004: 6) including a recognition that respondents are 'interpreting memories' rather than reporting history and that the researchers 'own histories' are implicated in what they are able to hear and recognise: 'As interpreters of other people's stories, we cannot stand outside our own life course and historical time' (2004: 4). Yet the project of disentangling historical facts from the subjective experience is not abandoned, even though working with this kind of material means 'making generalisations may be more risky than usual' (2004:3), and the 'reasonable well informed' interviewer and analyst 'requires a wealth of knowledge' (2004:6).

The way that the sample is constructed clearly locates the study as a piece of sociology rather than social history. Family case studies are drawn from volunteers in the grandparents generation and selected theoretically in order to fulfil a sample frame stratified by occupational status. Intact couples are identified in each generation, with a minimum of 6 and maximum of 8 individuals interviewed in each family chain. The focus on intact couples and tight parameters of those included provides a particular perspective on the family, excluding mother-daughter lineages and privileging families where, by definition, relationships are good enough to allow participation in this public sharing of family history. Place and location are not explored as an important dimension of the sampling strategy (although they are of vital importance in the case studies themselves). In an article with Ann Nilsen Brannen notes that in a study such as this 'a great deal of data about the cases and the population is needed to demonstrate the typicality of the cases' (2011: 606), and that generalisation is easier when drawing from a homogenous population. Systematically sampling of cases using abstract categories of generation, social class and family formation is a strategy for anchoring the sample in social space, demonstrates 'transparency and rigour' in the research process (2011: 606) and establishing the grounds for generalisation.

In their discussions of the limits of generalisation Brannen and colleagues defend the 'trade-off between depth and breadth' (2004: 5) in qualitative inter-generational research and the value of 'thick descriptions' for the creation and examination of theory. Yet there is also an aspiration that 'in comparing cases we may identify typologies of family relations and cultures which we can situate in specific times and spaces' (2004: 5). The authors argue that 'an analysis of twelve families is a powerful research strategy when combined with a strategic choice of cases, an historical contextualisation of the material – and the particular biographical method we have chosen' (2004: 5). This scaling-up from the concrete to the abstract is warranted by a labour intensive analytic process involving a series of different readings of the family case studies, characterised as 'a difficult juggling act: between looking across each member of a historical cohort' and 'exploring intergenerational relations and patterns' (2004:7). The authors map the sequence of the analysis in detail, with interview material initially made sense of in relation to distinct family histories, then read across families in order to characterise generational experience. A final stage involves comparison between families exploring generational differences on key topics, enabling the linking of biography and history and analytic movement between the micro and macro levels of family and cohort.

The final chapter of the book moves to the most abstract level, presenting develops typologies of families in which a vertical axis of social/ cultural mobility (operationalized as a continuum from

'innovation' to 'continuity') is mapped against a horizontal axis of geographical mobility (operationalized as a continuum from 'moving' to 'staying'). Families are located within one of four quadrants characterised as *solidaristic* (continuity + staying), *incorporation* (innovation + staying), *differentiation* (innovation + moving) and *reparation in estrangement* (continuity + moving). Brannen and colleagues acknowledge that this approach is schematic and that typologies are by their nature are 'static' (2004: 199). Yet the process of plotting the families against these temporally defined dimensions provides insights into the tensions that are lived by families as they negotiate a changing social landscape. The authors are interested in both intra and inter-generational dynamics within families and how in combination they may provoke innovation or not. They argue that 'tensions between change and continuity typically generates ambivalences' (2004: 179) and that there is value in understanding the different kinds of ambivalence generated as they reveal 'the limits upon resources people have available to them' (2004: 201). The resulting case studies have psychological depth and internal coherence, yet can be understood within a social and relational field. The authors conclude that 'that tensions arise and persist in families which manifest themselves in diverse ways through the materiality of life, through their unconscious dispositions and practices, through their ethical judgements, feelings, values and interpersonal relations' (2004: 201)

A social history of the present?

A fascinating contrast is provided by Angela Davies's *Modern motherhood: women and family in England 1945-2000*. While this study is differently oriented it nevertheless engages with many of the same issues concerning changing family life in Britain over the same post-war period. The project is framed as 'a study in gender history and women's history' (2012: 6) yet draws on many sociological texts as sources. At the heart of the research are 166 newly collected oral history interviews with women in rural, urban and suburban locations in Oxfordshire, supplemented with a group of graduates who were resident in the locality for an important period of their lives. Davies describes these women who range in age from their late 50's to their 90's as both middle and working class, a sample that is 'self-selecting in that all volunteered to be interviewed' (2012: 4). The notion of the social science sample informs Davie's methodological defence that 'while the numbers are significantly lower than for social survey and sampling methods [...] oral history provides the historian with dense and rich qualitative material rather than strength in number' (2012: 4). Davies does not seek to identify intergenerational chains of related women, but encouraged her interviewees to reflect on their lives in comparison to those in their parents and children's generation (2012:6). The focus of the research in a particular locality is central to her approach which involves building a picture of change over time in relation to a specific landscape. She explains that 'a 'a case study [...] rather than a national survey' enables 'an in-depth analysis of how living in different types of localities and communities affected women's experiences of motherhood' (2012: 5) allowing 'the cross generational experience of motherhood to be analysed by different generations of women from with the same communities' (2012:5).

In this approach, oral histories are supplemented with a range of documentary and secondary sources about the locality including public records (such as Medial Officer reports, planning documents) and local studies (for example of the impact of the developing car industry and the local history of the birth control movement). The desire to broaden out from the particular history of the Oxford and its environs 'to enable a national perspective to be gained' (2012:5) is licensed by the incorporation of 'a range of existing primary and secondary material' into the analysis including

Elizabeth Roberts' oral histories of women in Lancashire and correspondents to the Mass Observation project. The ethnic homogeneity of the oral history sample is 'addressed' by reference to studies of non-indigenous mothers as secondary sources.

In contrast to a sociological approach in which 'the sample' itself is the primary source of meaning and route to generalisation, Davis creates an assemblage of evidence of different kinds, treating each through a historical lens that asks questions about the purposes of the collectors and the cultural frames through which the evidence was interpreted. In her treatment of sociological source material¹ Davis (like others who have revisited this material and whose work she acknowledges) is interested in the preoccupations of the original researchers who in her view 'tended to operate on a class-based differentiation and assumed a valued-laden division between urban, rural and suburban communities' (2012: 49). She is also interested in the archived data itself drawing out findings that were less visible to the original investigators who are charged with 'a lack of appreciation of the ambivalent feelings women could hold towards their families'(2012:49). This enmeshing of secondary and archived sources with newly generated interview material is typical of the oral history tradition yet marks an important methodological boundary with modern sociological methods.

Davis's overall project is to contribute to the historical record of a particular period. She approaches the task thematically, synthesising primary and secondary sources in order to tell chapter length histories of: family and community; educating mothers; pregnancy and childbirth; experts and childcare bibles; working and caring; breadwinners and home-makers. She is interested in the study of subjectivity within historical accounts, arguing that these interviews 'can reveal the complex ways in which women compose their narratives in order to reconcile ideals of femininity with the reality of their own lives [...] unlike other sources, it makes it possible to examine how women review their experiences in the light of later development..' (2012:6). Like a good qualitative researcher Davis is attuned to silences, uncertainties and contradictions within interviews, citing oral historian Portelli to explain that 'oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did' (2012: 6). Drawing on the psychoanalytically informed work of historian Graham Dawson she characterises her project as mapping 'cultural imaginaries', 'vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs and narrative forms that are publically available within a culture at any one time and articulate its psychic and social dimensions' (2012:7).

Between historical and sociological imaginations

In counterposing these two studies my aim is not to say that one is better than the other but to observe different ways of approaching the challenge of researching generation which in turn reveals synergies and tensions between sociological and historical approaches. Boundaries between the disciplines are porous, especially in sub-fields such as feminist and life history research, with sociologists and historians aware of and citing each others work (for example Davis describes the intergenerational research of Brannen as capturing the 'subtle process' of intergenerational transmission). Interestingly, the findings of the two projects also resonate with each other, with Brannen and colleagues building an explanatory model around 'ambivalence' as mediating social and geographic mobility and Davis concluding that 'in the period 1945-2000 motherhood as a role is characterised by ambivalences and contradictions, some of which may be understood as fuelling the

feminist response of the 1970's' (2012: 212). Yet it is the methodological differences (and their consequences) that are especially intriguing to me.

The most obvious differences is in the ways in which the category 'generation' is operationalised. For Brannen and colleagues generation is first and foremost defined by positions within a family and the accounts that arise from their approach are rich and relational leading to analyses with psychological depth and complexity. The analytic task of mapping family generations onto historical generation is challenging, involving several stages of transposition – including comparison within and between families and within and between generations, leading to a thematic analysis of change and continuity using the full range of sources available. For Davis, generation is first and foremost historical and cohort based, with women's lives plotted against a timeline of social and cultural change. Although they are asked to reflect on the lives of the generations above and below, the complexity of the family and the couple as vehicles through which time lived is avoided by the decision not to trace generational chains. This does not mean that stories of family tension are absent, but the absence of conflicting or linked accounts means that the specificity of individual families fades making it possible to focus on a meta-narrative about gender, feminism and wider social and cultural trends.

The different way that geography features in these two studies is also striking. For Davis, 'place' is the starting point, and she uses the 1944 Country Planning Survey so map a physical environment as a landscape for mothering, including post war housing developments and the dynamics of town, gown and village that shape the character of Oxford and its environs. Yet as the study is built she goes beyond these local sources in a speculative bid to tell a 'national' and explicitly 'historical' story. In contrast Brannen and colleagues are extremely cautious about making generalisation, the 'systematic case selection' that they employ in building their sample is itself a strategy that uses homogeneity as a way of focussing attention on the operation of key elements of difference (for example social class). Paradoxically, while locality is entirely absent in the study design, geographical place is central to the family case studies that result from this approach, and to the analysis and abstract typologies that arise from them.

Returning to the ideas explored in the introduction to this short paper, how might we locate these two studies in relation to a history of sociology that charts an evolution from a synthetic, normative and problem focused discipline to one that abstracts individuals from the physical landscape? I have found reading Brannen et al.'s research through this lens to be generative. On one hand their work embodies much of the best of the modernist sociological method as characterised by Savage. First it takes nothing for granted – the accounts of individuals and families are collected and interrogated without preconceptions – even though researchers wishing to engage in a knowledgeable way with interviewees must bring within them a great deal of background knowledge of the period and the context. Importantly, interviews are not seen as 'illustrative material' for established facts or values but as a source of new knowledge in their own right. Their approach also refuses conventional normative framings. Meanings and patterns are looked for and identified within 'the data', through a process of rigorous and layered analysis and comparison. Other sources are understood as 'context' rather than data in their own right. While context enriches an analysis, it does not become part of the analysis. It is an approach that also has profound respect for the everyday and ordinary. These are not famous families, whose lives would have been documented as a matter of course. Interviews are open and wide ranging encouraging participants and analysts to make visible the 'taken for

granted'. The collection of multiple accounts from different family members testifies to the value placed on the small stories of family life that are as contested and multifaceted as the big stories of social history. Yet Brannen's work also disrupts Savage's argument, revealing the partiality of his account and important omissions. For example the systematic reflexivity that is a characteristic of feminist research contrasts with the idea of a social science approaches that 'systematically conceal their own tracks' (Savage 2010: 237) suggesting that the work of both Brannen and Davies might also be understood within an interdisciplinary history of feminist research methodologies that plays little part in Savage's periodisation.

Reading the two studies against each other is also an interesting exercise, revealing the significance of methodological boundaries between disciplines and their understandings of 'evidence'. For sociologists there continues to be an important distinction between 'data' and 'context' and between primary data and secondary sources, whereas both are 'sources' for the historian, subject to similar questions about authorship and production and easily combined within analytic accounts. Sociologists must justify how a sampling strategy enacts and brackets 'data' from the wealth of material that is conceived as a 'literature' to engage with rather than sources for interrogation. The growing interest in archived sources and secondary analysis within British sociology suggests that these are boundaries that are in the process of being redrawn – as a 'turn to time' encourages a melding of the historical and sociological imagination (Gillies and Edwards 2012, Geiger et al. 2010, Edwards and Crow 2012). Julia Brannen's rich body of generational research and methodological invention (Brannen 2012, Brannen et al 2011) provide us with a model for a distinctly sociological approach to the study of generation that is informed both by a historical sensibility, interdisciplinary awareness and critical traditions of reflexivity. These studies produce powerful and compelling insights into how time is lived, using tools and tactics formed to capture synchronic patterns in order to do the painstaking work of a four dimensional sociology that articulates social structures over time, moving between the fine detail of everyday life and the macro level of social structures.

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ⁱ Including the 'classic' family and community studies of Willmott and Young (Bethnal Green and 'Greenleigh'), Pearl Jephcott (Notting Hill) and Rosser and Harris (Swansea) as well as the Ann Oakley's feminist sociology of childbirth).