

CHAPTER 2

Generations, Cohorts, and Social Change

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The transformations that occur via a *succession of cohorts* cannot, for basic demographic reasons, be equated to the product of a *procession of "generations."* ... this brute fact is a profound key to the understanding of social continuity and social change. Indeed, a characteristically human type of society might well be impossible were the demography of the species structured differently. (Otis Dudley Duncan, 1966, p. 59)

INTRODUCTION

Social philosophers from Auguste Comte to David Hume considered the fundamental linkage between the biological succession of generations and change in the nature of society. As early as 1835, the statistician Adolphe Quetelet wrote about the importance of taking *year of birth* into account when examining human development (see Becker, 1992, p. 19). In the 1920s, the German sociologist Karl Mannheim wrote a highly cited treatise entitled "The Problem of Generations," arguing that having shared the same formative experiences contributes to a unique world view or frame of reference that can be a powerful force in people's lives. In Mannheim's words (1952, p. 298): "Even if the rest of one's life consisted of one long process of negation and destruction of the natural world view acquired in youth, the determining

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influence of these early impressions would still be predominant.” Similarly, the Spanish sociologist José Ortega y Gasset wrote that generation “is the most important conception in history” (1933, p. 15) arguing that each generation has a special mission even if it goes unachieved (see Kertzer, 1983, p. 128).

In the modern era of social science, a similar sort of generational reasoning has been widely employed in empirical studies aimed at documenting how societies change. For example, in the 1950s Samuel Stouffer found that popular support for the toleration of Communists, atheists, and socialists followed generational lines, with more recent generations being significantly more tolerant than their elders. He argued that this was due in part to their higher levels of education, which fostered openness to “freedom of speech” and the exchange of ideas (Stouffer, 1955). In the 1970s, Ronald Inglehart found that post-World War II generations in Western Europe sought freedom and self-expression, in contrast to the pre-War generations’ concern for economic security and political order (Inglehart, 1977, 1986, 1990). He argued from a Maslowian “hierarchy of needs” perspective that more recent generations had the luxury of economic prosperity that could not be taken for granted by their elders who had to focus on a more basic set of needs in an earlier time. More recently, Robert Putnam (2000) argued in his popular book *Bowling Alone* that civic engagement has declined, not because individual Americans have become less civic-minded, but mostly because earlier-born, engaged Americans have died off and been replaced by younger, more alienated ones, who are by and large less tied to traditional institutions, such as the church, the lodge, the bridge club, and the bowling league.

According to this theoretical perspective, how people think about the social world around them may depend as much on what was happening in the world *at the time they were growing up* as it does on what is happening in the present. The reference to this as a “generational” phenomenon is probably derived from the presumption that historically based influences shaped the development of all or most people growing up at a particular time and that there is nearly always a shared cultural identity that sets them apart from the parental generation. The idea of distinctive generations is, however, a complex one whose existence and effects are not easily documented. One of the persistent questions in research on social change upon which we focus considerable attention in this chapter is whether the unique formative experiences of different generations become distinctively imprinted on their world views making them distinct in their orientations and identities; or whatever the nature of their formative experiences, do people nevertheless adapt to change, remaining evanescent in their dispositions, identities, and beliefs throughout their lives? Unique historical events that happen during youth are no doubt powerful. Certainly, some eras and social movements (e.g., the Women’s movement, or the Civil Rights Era) or the emergence of some new ideologies (e.g., Roosevelt’s New Deal of the 1930s, or the environmental movement of the 1970s) provide distinctive experiences for youth during particular times. As Norman Ryder put it “the potential for change is concentrated in the cohorts of young adults who are old enough to participate directly in the movements impelled by change, but not old enough to have become committed to an occupation, a residence, a family of procreation or a way of life” (Ryder, 1965, p. 848).

In this chapter we focus not only on the potential of the concept of *generations* to reveal how societies change, but also on some of the major problems with trying to make sense of the social world in this way. In order to do so we first distinguish the concept from other related concepts, and in our next section (Section II) we review the multiple meanings of the concept of generation. We focus on how it is different from and related to other concepts used in the analysis of social change. Following this initial effort to reduce what we consider to be a prevalent terminological confusion in the area, we examine in detail the two major ways in

which the concept of *generation* is employed in contemporary social science: first referring to a *position in the natural line of descent* within families (Section III) and second the *historical timing of birth* (Sections IV and V). Given the prominence of theories of *cohort replacement* (as distinct from generational replacement) in the study of social change, we review the essential assumptions made by the theoretical framework and discuss some of the difficulties involved in employing the theory in life course research (Section VI). We examine the evidence for the theory and discuss several empirical examples from recent research to illustrate the prospects and pitfalls of the proposed conceptual apparatus. We end the essay with a brief consideration of a third meaning of the term *generation* (based on the theories of Mannheim and Ortega y Gasset) which is distinct from the others, but which has the unrealized potential to help understand the origins of social change. This concept of *generation* (referred to in what follows with a capital “G” or *Generations*), while related to other uses of the term, is quite distinct, referring to historical phenomena that are not as easily located and quantified as are cohorts and cohort effects. Still, we argue that such phenomena may have as much, if not more, potential for understanding the origins and nature of social change. Generations, in this sense may be more a matter of quality than of degree, and their temporal boundaries may not be as easily identified as is sometimes assumed. We conclude the essay with a summary of the territory covered, along with a call for more research on generations that will improve their usefulness as a tool in the study of life course processes.

GENERATIONS AND COHORTS—SOME DEFINITIONS

One of the first difficulties we encounter in studying the phenomenon of generations is with the term “generation” itself. This is because the concept of *generation* has more than one legitimate meaning and this multiplicity of meanings can produce confusion. It is first and foremost a kinship term, referring to relationships between individuals who have a common ancestor. As a term denoting kinship relations, a generation consists of a single stage or degree in the natural line of descent. Thus, within a given family, generations are very clearly defined, and while *generational replacement* is more or less a biological inevitability *within families* (assuming continuous life cycle processes), the replacement of generations in this sense does not correspond in any neat manner to the historical process at the macrosocial level because of individual differences in fertility (i.e., parents do not all replace themselves at the same rate) and the fact that the temporal gap between generations is variable across families.

The term *generation* is also frequently used, as we ourselves have used it in the introductory paragraphs, to refer to the people born at about the same time and who therefore experience historical events at the same times in their lives. This meaning of the term was popularized by Mannheim’s classic treatise on “generations” in which he used the term to refer to the unique influences of historical location on the development of the shared meaning of events and experiences of youth. As we discuss below, many sociologists understandably confuse this meaning of the concept of “generation” with the concept of “cohort”, since they share a historical referent. We hope our discussion will reduce the confusion rather than add to it.

The fact that there are at least two accepted meanings of the concept of generation has been a source of confusion, and various authors have tried to resolve the seeming incompatibility of these meanings. Indeed, some have argued that Mannheim, Ortega y Gasset and their followers have usurped what may be thought of as principally a kinship term to inappropriately refer to groups of people who share a distinctive culture and/or a self-conscious identity

by virtue of their having experienced the same historical events at the same time in their lives, setting them apart from their parents and grandparents (see Kertzer, 1983).

Because of this potential confusion of meanings, and in an apparent effort to be more precise, some sociologists prefer the term *birth cohort* for what many others refer to as generations in the historical sense of the term (see Ryder, 1965). In general a *cohort* is a group of people who have shared some critical experience during the same interval of time. For example, people who enter college in a given year are referred to as an “entering cohort” and those who graduate in the same year would be called a “graduating cohort”. Or, those persons marrying in a given year are called a “marriage cohort”. In each case, there is an event or experience in common that defines the cohort. When sociologists talk about *generations* in the sense of a group of people who share the same historical time frame during their youth, they are often implicitly using “year of birth” as the event that defines the cohort. Thus, the term “cohort” is often used as shorthand for “birth cohort”, which refers to all persons born in the same year. This is the way in which we use the term in this chapter. Defined in this way, knowing a person’s *cohort* membership may be thought to index the unique historical period in which a group’s common experiences are embedded, but as we shall argue, this does not necessarily make a “cohort” (or a set of cohorts) a “generation”.

Members of a birth cohort share a social history, that is, historical events and the opportunities and constraints posed by society at a given time. Further, members of a birth cohort share the experience of the life cycle at the same time, that is, they experience childhood, reach adolescence, grow into early adulthood, and mature into midlife and old age at the same time. And finally, members of a birth cohort share the experience of the cohort itself, that is, the distinctive aspects of the cohort, for example, its size or its level of education, are something unique to the cohort. The sharing of experiences by members of the same cohort, as we shall see, does not necessarily define a “generation” in the sense of Mannheim and Ortega y Gasset.

Given the above definitions, a *cohort effect* refers to a distinctive formative experience which members of a birth cohort (or set of birth cohorts) share that lasts—and marks them—throughout their lives. For example, people who grew up during the Great Depression of the 1930s have different ideas about money than those who grew up in more prosperous times (Elder, 1974). Or, the women who were the first to have exercised their political enfranchisement after the 19th Amendment was passed in the early part of this century may have taken voting more seriously throughout their lives and reported higher rates of voter turnout (Firebaugh & Chen, 1995).

Birth cohorts are also affected by their own characteristics, and another example of a cohort effect involves the phenomenon of cohort size. For example, in a path-breaking series of studies, Easterlin (1987) argues that the numerically large set of birth cohorts making up the Baby Boom are at a significant socioeconomic disadvantage relative to that of their predecessors, simply because of its size. The number of persons born in a particular year, thus, has far-reaching consequences, given its effects on competition for jobs and the strain it produces on the opportunity structure. Easterlin (1987) argues that relative cohort size affects, not only the economic well-being of cohort members, but many features of the family and individual functioning, including fertility rates. Individuals in large cohorts will be less likely to marry, more likely to put off having children, mothers will be more likely to work outside the home, and as young adults they will be more likely to experience psychological stress and feelings of alienation. For a review of the current status of research on the “Easterlin effect”, see Pampel (1993).

Cohort effects, as described above, refer to the impact of historical events and processes on individual lives. As Modell (1989) notes, however, we need not limit our conception of

cohort effects to this sort of one-way relationship between history and the individual. He argues for “a sociohistorical approach to the life course” that focuses as well on “the way those altered individual experiences *aggregated* to constitute a new *context* for others living through these changes” (Modell, 1989, p. 22). The reactions of some cohorts to their historical experiences often become normative patterns that, once rationalized by society, influence the lives of later cohorts. In this sense cohort effects can be thought of as both direct and indirect. He uses the example of dating patterns among youth in American society to illustrate this point, and his analysis shows that adolescent dating, an invention of the 1920s (invented mainly by adolescent women), became a normative pattern among adolescents of the 1950s and 1960s, one which he argues actually constrained the choices that young women could make (Modell, 1989).

It is often correctly suggested that the term generation should *not* be used when we mean birth cohort (Ryder, 1965; Kertzer, 1983). From the foregoing we can see that generations in the kinship sense of the term are nested within families and individual family members are nested within generations. We also know that as part of the historical process individuals are simultaneously nested within cohorts. Differences between generations within families do not easily translate into differences among cohorts and vice versa, and there is no identity between generations and cohorts in this sense. This is because members of a given generation are likely to be members of several different cohorts, because of individual differences in fertility within generations, and because of the variability in the historical distance between generations within families.

With respect to laying claim on the concept of generation, we do not see the importance of phrasing the terminological issue as a competition among historical theorists on the one hand and life course analysts on the other (Kertzer, 1983). We agree that neither meaning of the concept of “generation” should be confused with the ideas of “cohort” and cohort effects. However, despite the potential confusion in terminology, it seems to us plausible to tolerate all meanings (given above) for generation, using it both in its genealogical sense of a stage in a line of descent when appropriate, but we would also allow the term (in the historical sense) when the focus is on *groups of people who share a distinctive culture and/or a self-conscious identity by virtue of their having experienced the same historical events* at roughly the same time in their lives [we will henceforth capitalize the word whenever we use it in this second way, i.e., as Generation]. In this sense the concept of “Generation”, found in the work of Mannheim and Ortega y Gasset, is not intended to be the same thing as “cohort”, and when one appreciates the meaning of the concept as used in their writings it will become obvious that the concept of Generation implies much more than simply cohort differences. The latter may be suggestive of Generational differences, but although cohort differentiation may be thought to be a necessary condition for Generational differences, they by themselves may not be sufficient for saying that Generations truly exist in the sense of having a distinctive culture and shared identity.

In other words, cohort effects do not automatically imply the existence of Generations. According to White (1991), cohorts only become “actors” when they cohere enough around historical events, in both their own and others’ eyes, to be called “Generations”. In this sense, we would distinguish between cohorts and Generations, in that the former refers simply to the effects attributable to having been placed by one’s birth in a particular historical period, whereas a Generation is (in White’s words) a “joint interpretive construction which insists upon and builds among tangible cohorts in defining a style recognized from outside and from within” (p. 31). Through such mechanisms “cohort effects” are given life through these interpretive and behavioral aspects. The point here is that there is an “identity” component to

Generations, made explicit in the work of Mannheim (1952) and Ortega y Gasset (1933) that may be difficult to pin down when simply studying cohort differences and their tendencies to persevere. The existence of cohort effects and the existence of Generations are two different albeit related questions. We return to this issue later in the chapter.

INTERGENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

In virtually all societies, each generation experiences life differently. Each has its “unique themes and problems [regularly facing] situations vastly different from those that confronted their parents” (Clausen, 1986, p. 7). The parental generation is often responsible for mediating the influences of social change on their children, and the role of the elder generations in promoting adaptation to social change is sometimes acknowledged (Inkeles, 1958). As we observed in the earlier discussion, assuming the continuity of reproduction, generational replacement (not to be confused with cohort replacement) is a virtual biological inevitability within families (although some family lines do die out). While it is important to study the relationship between generations, both with regard to the socialization of children (Alwin, 1996c), as well as intergenerational relationships across the life span (Riley & Riley, 1996), conceptualization of generational influences in this sense may be less useful for studying social change. As we pointed out earlier, this stems from the fact that the distance between generations is variable within families and therefore generational differences (in this kinship sense) do not translate in any neat manner into cohort effects (Duncan, 1966; Ryder, 1965).

To use the terminology developed in this essay (see below), generational differences in this sense contain the influences of two independent factors, age effects and cohort effects, and under normal circumstances it is difficult to identify the extent to which either may be operating. Studies of intergenerational differences are nonetheless interesting because they can tell us about family influences and the relationships between generations, and in this section we review some of these possibilities. The simplest and probably the most common type of intergenerational research design is one in which a sample of persons is interviewed about themselves and one or both of their parents. There is, for example, a long tradition in research on social mobility that gathers intergenerational data on occupational attainments by asking a sample of men and women about their own and their father’s socioeconomic attainments, and then using the comparisons across generations to say something about social stratification (see, e.g., Biblarz, Bengtson, & Bucur, 1996; Blau & Duncan, 1967; Duncan, 1966, 1968; Featherman & Hauser, 1978). This literature has painstakingly pointed out that *while the generation of children in such analyses represents sets of birth cohorts, the generation of parents do not*, due to individual differences in fertility (see Blau & Duncan, 1967, pp. 82–91). It would therefore be inappropriate and misleading to draw inferences about social change from such intergenerational data, as if they represented differences in cohorts.

The reverse error can also be made, that is, making inferences about generational differences from differences between cohorts. A 1993 article in the *Harvard Educational Review* argued that “today’s high-school-educated males earn less than their fathers did” on the basis of differences among cohorts in a cross-sectional survey (Murnane & Levy, 1993). While the authors provide some interesting intercohort comparisons of earnings differentials, their article did not contain any information about intergenerational change in incomes within families.

Other research designs actually collect data from more than one generation. Jennings and Neimi’s (1981) classic study of a nationally representative sample of high-school seniors and their parents charted the development of political views among young adults in relation

to their parents through the 1960s and early 1970s. Bengtson's (1975) study of the "generation gap" in attitudes and values between generations was based on tracking members of subsequent generations down family lineages and interviewing three generations (see Glass, Bengtson, & Dunham, 1986). Bengtson and Roberts (1991) studied intergenerational solidarity using extensive reinterviews of many of the same sample members. Similarly, Rossi and Rossi (1990) use a three-generation data set to study intergenerational relations, focusing (among other things) on normative obligations to kin. They find that such normative beliefs are structured according to the degree of relatedness, not by type of relative within levels of relatedness—that is, obligations to parents and children were roughly equal, but greater than obligations to grandparents and grandchildren, which were greater than felt obligations to aunts and uncles and nieces and nephews. One advantage of multigenerational research is that the data represent related individuals rather than separate and unrelated birth cohorts, and for purposes of assessing similarities and differences within families controlling for a range of family-related factors, this approach has considerable merit. For example, in the General Social Survey, cross-sectional samples of individuals are interviewed and (among other things) report information about their parents; taken by themselves, however, the data on parents do not necessarily generalize to any easily identifiable group in society (see, e.g., Blau & Duncan, 1967, pp. 82–84). These methodological problems do not always stop the creative analyst (Bengtson & Cutler, 1976; Rossi & Rossi, 1990, pp. 92–101).

MECHANISMS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Popular theories of social change rest on the idea that culture, social norms, and social behavior change through two main mechanisms: (1) through changes undergone by individuals (due to aging or period effects), and (2) through the succession of cohorts (Ryder, 1965; Firebaugh, 1992; Glenn, this volume). Several things connected to the lives of individuals have a bearing on how society changes, and thus, there is a linkage between individuals and social change—society changes (paradoxically) both because individuals change and because they remain stable or unchanged after an early period of socialization. Demographers refer to this set of mechanisms as the *Age–Period–Cohort model* of social change because these mechanisms summarize the influences of aging, time period, and cohort membership on social change (see Mason & Fienberg, 1985). [It is unnecessary for present purposes to introduce either notion of generation discussed above, as this is simply a statistical framework that aims to account for variation.] These influences, discussed here, can be visualized with respect to Figure 2-1, which depicts the intersection of biographical and historical time in the lives of four hypothetical cohorts.

Changes to individuals, occurring in biographical time (see Figure 2-1), that influence social change are normally thought to happen because of factors associated with two different phenomena. The first of these is *aging*. Simply put, people change as they get older due to some combination of biological, psychological and social mechanisms. Aging is usually identified with differences among individuals that are linked to their getting older, becoming more mature as a function of having lived more of life, or because of physical or cognitive decline and impairment. For example, the population may be becoming more conservative as a function of the dual facts that people become more conservative as they age and that the population on average is getting older (see Alwin, 1998a). The second source of individual change comes about through people's responses to historical events and processes—called *period effects*—occurring in historical time (see Figure 2-1). When the entire society gets caught up in and is affected by a set

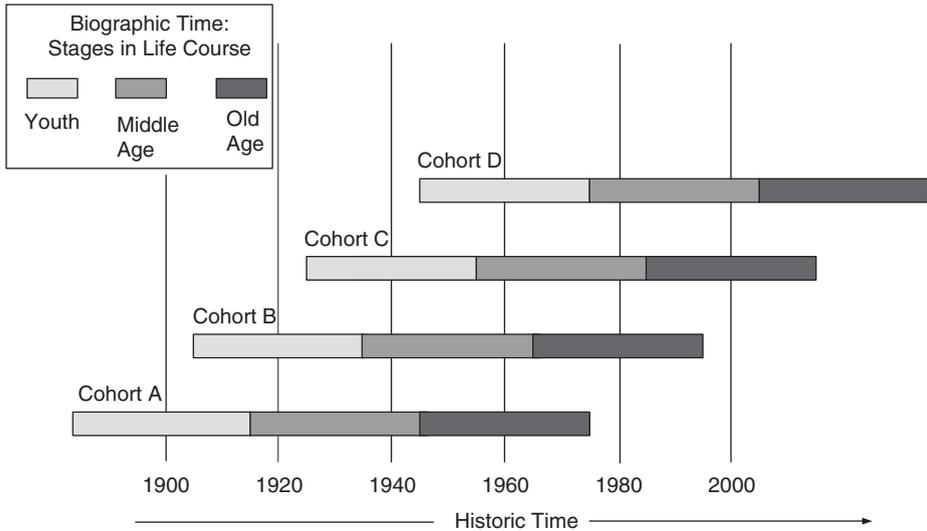


FIGURE 2-1. Intersection of biographic and historic time.

of historical events, such as a war, an economic depression, or a social movement, the widespread changes that occur are called period effects. The Civil Rights movement, for example, may have changed ideas about race for all Americans, not just those birth cohorts growing up in the 1960s (if it affected primarily the young it would be called a cohort effect—see below). Similarly, not only were the youngest cohorts of women and men affected by the Feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the movement may have influenced the views of almost everyone living in the society during that time to some extent. There is a fine line between what should be considered a “cohort” versus a “period” effect, but it usually comes down to *who* is affected by the events in question. In some cases it is impossible for most members of society to remain unaffected by some changes—such as changes in the economy or the influence of computers on society. Or, to take an example of more recent history, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC have had profound effects on *all* members of American society, regardless of year of birth.

The third source of change in society is *cohort succession*, which is the gradual replacement of earlier born cohorts by later ones. This results not from individual change, as is the case with aging and period effects, but from individual stability. When the effects of historical events tied to particular eras mainly affect the young, the result is potentially a cohort effect. Recall, we earlier defined a *cohort effect* as a distinctive formative experience that members of a birth cohort (or set of birth cohorts) share that *persists throughout their lives*.^{*} For example, as noted earlier, it is sometimes suggested that civic engagement has declined in America overall, even though individual Americans have not necessarily become less civic-minded (Putnam, 2000). This may be because older, more publicly engaged citizens are dying off and being replaced by younger, more alienated Americans who are less tied to institutions such as a church, lodge, political party, or bowling league. Or, if those cohorts who reached

^{*}We eschew the commonly used term “age cohorts” which conflates the two elements “aging” and “cohort” into one, elements that refer to distinct sources of social change.

economic independence during the Great Depression are seen to be particularly thrifty, this implies that the experience of growing up under privation permanently changed this set of cohorts' economic style of life due to their formative years. As these members of society die off, they may leave behind a somewhat less frugal set of cohorts.

Now that we have defined the nature of age, period, and cohort effects, how do these factors combine to shape social change, and how can their influences be studied using empirical data? The age-period-cohort model recognizes that these are all important causal factors. Unfortunately the individual parts of this model—namely the effects of aging, cohorts, and time periods—are not easy to understand in isolation from one another, and there are serious problems with uniquely identifying their separate effects. It is thus sometimes difficult to place any one interpretation on observed data. Generally speaking, it is often necessary to concede that social change could be due to the operation of all three of these factors at once without knowing which is more powerful.

The best research designs for the study of aging are longitudinal studies of the same people over time, otherwise known as panel designs (Alwin & Scott, 1996; Duncan & Kalton, 1987; Halaby, this volume). Panel data are necessary to ascertain information on gross rates of constancy and change and ultimately to assess levels of human stability, and it may be possible to gain some insight into the extent of aging effects by analyzing the extent of change in individual differences in panel designs. Often such designs control for cohort differences, but while it is possible to study how individuals change using such designs, it is usually more difficult to understand why they change as they do. Specifically, as noted above, change happening to individuals may be due to aging and/or period, and it is often difficult to sort out which explains the change. By contrast the best designs for studying cohort effects are repeated cross-sectional surveys, which do not study the same people but the same cohorts over time (Campbell, Abolafia, & Maddox, 1985). Such survey designs can study the same cohorts over time, and while less useful for studying how individuals change, they can provide estimates of net change and of cohort replacement as we discuss further below. There are many potential pitfalls that await the age-period-cohort analyst, and many precautions must be taken to guard against potential fallacies and errors of inference in repeated cross-section designs (Mason & Fienberg, 1985; see also Glenn in this volume). The cohort sequential design—one that combines features of the cross-sectional and panel designs—follows repeated cohorts over time (see Schaie, 1996, pp. 30–32). To the extent sampled cohorts are representative of society (or relevant subgroups), such a design can yield information on both gross and net change.

THE IDENTIFICATION OF COHORT EFFECTS

If we were to look at a cross-section of adults in American society, it would be easy to confuse cohort differences with the possibility that they might instead reflect differences due to experience or maturity (i.e., aging). Earlier-born cohorts not only grew up in a different era, they are now also older and more experienced. By contrast, cohorts born more recently are younger and have less experience. So, if one is looking at a phenomenon that is influenced both by the amount of experience one has as well as the particular slice of history in which one participated when growing up, the results of empirical analyses can be quite puzzling. Similarly, if one is studying the changes in a single cohort (or set of cohorts) over time, effects that might otherwise be attributable to aging are confounded with period effects, and disentangling the two sets of influences can be exceedingly difficult.

To illustrate the seriousness of the problem, we assume from the above discussion that variables representing the three main sets of factors can be thought of as affecting the mean levels of variables: aging (A), chronological time or period (P), and birth cohort (C). These are conceptual categories of variables representing rich and complex sets of influences that operate primarily through (1) processes of aging and life cycle changes, (2) those effects due to the distinctiveness of the time of measurement or historical period, and (3) processes influencing specific cohorts. The problem is, however, that within a given survey, A (age) and C (cohort) are perfectly correlated. And in a series of repeated cross-sections, within cohorts, A (age) and C (cohort) are perfectly correlated (Mason & Fienberg, 1985). Because $\text{Age} = \text{Time} - \text{Birth Date}$ ($A = P - C$), it is rarely possible to separate the influences of “aging”, “cohorts”, and “time periods” using cross-sectional data in any purely exploratory fashion. One needs to be able to impose a strong set of assumptions about the nature of one or more of these three sources of variation—aging, cohorts, and periods—in order to identify these separate influences unequivocally. By turning to supplementary types of data, what Converse (1976) and others have called “side information”, assumptions about the nature of certain historical, aging, or cohort processes, it may be possible to simplify the problem. If one can make strong theoretical assumptions about the nature of certain influences, for example setting either cohort, aging, or period effects to zero, it is possible to creatively interpret survey data. Short of such strong assumptions, it is usually not possible to cleanly disentangle these processes empirically from such data alone.

An example of the ambiguity of the evaluation and interpretation of social change with respect to age, period, and cohort influences involves the case of self-reports of attendance at religious services (see Alwin & McCammon, 2002). Data collected to assess these trends from the General Social Survey (GSS) asked random samples of the American public to report how often they attended religious services over the past year (data not shown here). Such data point to major cohort differences in observance of weekly services. Those born in the years from 1915 to 1930—sometimes called the “greatest generation”—as well as those born earlier report typical attendance at church services about 25 weeks per year, or about half the time on average. By contrast, people born after World War II attended church substantially less often—those born from 1963 to 1980 report attending services an average of less than 15 weeks per year. These changes may be due to an overall decline in attendance levels among churchgoers, or to the expansion of the group that does not attend church at all, or both (see Hout & Fischer, 2002).

If one were to place a cohort replacement interpretation on these figures, one might argue that as the older cohorts of church attenders die off and are replaced by much more secularly oriented and less participatory cohorts, society as a whole will become decidedly less observant of church services. This type of conclusion would fit well the kinds of interpretations made by Putnam (2000) and others decrying the state of modern life as one devoid of communal ties. But perhaps there are no such cohort effects at all, once other factors are taken into account. For example, these results might be explained, fully or partly, by aging and life cycle factors. Typically, after a youthful period of church avoidance, people may participate more in religious activities. One common explanation for these patterns is that levels of religious participation reflect the effects of aging or the life cycle rather than cohort influences, and that the higher levels of involvement among the cohorts born earlier has as much to do with their age as it does their cohort membership (Hout & Greeley, 1987).

Of course, although it is not always foolproof, one of the most important strategies for the analysis of aging, period, and cohort effects is to plot the data by cohort (or cohort categories) over time, examining the empirical regularities directly. Moreover, it is often very important to take other factors into account in such analyses. For the example of church attendance it is

important to examine the data separately for denominational groups because members of the Roman Catholic faith account for virtually all the decline in church attendance in American society from the early 1970s through the 1990s (data not shown). Catholics attended some 35 weeks per year in the early 1970s and some 30 years later had declined to nearly 22 weeks per year. These patterns were due, as most religious scholars agree, to the profound differences between Vatican policy on the reproductive rights of women and the views of many lay Catholics (see Greeley, 1989; Hout & Greeley, 1987). By contrast, the level of church attendance among Protestants has not changed significantly over this period, remaining relatively stable at around 24 weeks per year.

Consequently, it should be clear that life course factors interact with other variables (in this case religious denomination), and it is important that the analysis of cohort effects take such factors into account. The question can be raised in this example about the extent to which cohort replacement has a role in the Catholic and Protestant trends. Are the more recently born, less active Catholics replacing the more active Catholics who had died, and is this also true among Protestants? Overall, there appear to be clear cohort trends revealing declining church service attendance in the most recent cohorts (i.e., a cohort effect). Among Catholics there appears to also be a decline in church attendance among all cohort categories, which we can probably attribute at least in part to period factors. Such period factors would not be operating among Protestants given their origin in the institutional policies of the Catholic Church. In fact, among Protestants the cohort trends appear to be accompanied by positive within cohort changes for most of the cohort groups suggesting either a life cycle effect favoring increased church attendance or a period effect in a direction opposite that operating among Catholics. Given the lack of net change in church attendance over this period among Protestants, it is conceivable that the declining cohort trend is balanced by a positive within-cohort trend over the period covered here. Unfortunately, from such analyses it may be not clear whether the within-cohort differences result from unique effects of historical factors on different cohorts, or whether they reflect the age composition of the cohort categories, or to some combination of both. This is an example, however, where cohort analysis would appear to be fruitless without considering additional variables.

There are some cases in which the exploratory analysis of the data can quite clearly demonstrate the nature of the influences of age, period, and cohort. An example of this from recent analyses involves data concerning *trust in government* from the National Election Studies (NES) (Alwin, 2002a). The NES surveys included the question: "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?" These results fairly convincingly show that the amount of trust one has in the government at any point in time has mostly to do with the government at a particular point in time and not to characteristics of the individual, such as when they were born. All cohorts follow virtually the same pattern, moving from very high levels of support in the 1950s to rather low levels in the 1990s. In other words, it does not appear to be the case that either cohort differences or the experiences of aging contribute in any detectable way to variation in trust in the government and that period factors largely explain the patterns over time. One would need to postulate a rather complicated combination of aging and cohort effects to contradict this rather simple explanation of the results in this case (see Alwin, 2002a).

Generally speaking the contribution of age, period, and cohort factors to variation in individuals' scores on such questions is far from clear and their confounding in longitudinal designs creates several challenges in isolating the effects of any set of influences. For example, when political scientists find that younger voters are much less likely to identify with either major political party, this could be due to the fact that more recent cohorts are turned off by partisan politics, or to the fact that the intensity of party loyalty is a function of aging and the experience that comes with it, *or both* (see Converse, 1976). As we have suggested, due to the

confounding of aging, period, and cohort influences in any series of replicate surveys, it is rarely possible to separate the effects of aging, cohorts, and time period by simply analyzing the linear additive effects of age, birth year, and time of survey. Without the ability to make some assumptions, which is often lacking, there is no straightforward solution to the identification problem. However, one can decompose trend data reflecting social change into two orthogonal components: the between-cohort versus within-cohort part of the trend (see Firebaugh, 1989). The between-cohort component can be interpreted in terms of cohort replacement if one is willing to assume that the age compositional differences between the cohorts are not actually producing the effect. The within-cohort component, as mentioned above, can be interpreted either in terms of aging or life cycle effects, or in terms of historic or period effects. Again, if one assumes that the effects of aging do not operate on the means but on the stability of individual differences, then this component is likely to represent period effects (see Alwin, 1996a). The problems with doing this are discussed in greater detail by Firebaugh (1989) and Rodgers (1990).

SOCIAL CHANGE AS COHORT REPLACEMENT

As we already noted, popular theories of social change rest on the idea that change occurs through the succession of cohorts. The theory of “cohort replacement”, as we refer to it here, makes several critical assumptions, which we explore in greater detail in this section: (1) the *impressionable youth* assumption—that youth is an impressionable period of the life course in which individuals are maximally open to the socialization influences of the social environment; (2) the *individual persistence* assumption—people acquire their world views (values, beliefs, and attitudes) during these impressionable years and largely maintain those views over most of their lives; (3) the *cohort effects* assumption—unique cohort experiences are formed, due to the distinctive influence of historical events and experiences, such that there are clear differences across birth cohorts in typical beliefs and attitudes; and (4) the assumption of *social change*—as a consequence of the above processes society changes gradually in the direction of the more recent cohorts.

An alternative view would argue that the theory exaggerates the potential for the lasting effects of early socialization experiences, that individuals’ views are not particularly stable over their lives, that members of particular cohorts or generations do not differ uniformly in their social experiences and their identities, and that social change results as much from aggregate changes within society, indeed within cohorts, via shifts in individual lives or to macrolevel historical (or period) effects, than it does from generational replacement.

So, which perspective is most likely to be true? Is there any evidence for these components of the cohort replacement theory of social change? Given the way we have formulated the theory in the above paragraphs, the answer would seem to lie in the truth of the four major assumptions that go into the cohort replacement argument and the kinds of evidence that exist for them. In the remainder of the chapter we summarize what is known about each of these elements of the theory.

The Impressionable Years

How open are young people to change, relative to other times in their lives? Developmental psychologists have argued that youth, at least in Western culture, does appear to represent a

time of susceptibility to change. In the words of Erik Erikson (1988: 21) “to enter history, each generation of youth must find an identity consonant with its own childhood and consonant with an ideological promise in the perceptible historical process.” During youth the tables are turned, continues Erikson: “No longer is it merely for the old to teach the young the meaning of life ... it is the young who, by their responses and actions, tell the old whether life as represented by the old and presented to the young has meaning; and it is the young who carry in them the power to confirm those who confirm them and, joining the issues, to renew and to regenerate, or to reform and to rebel.”

Thus, youth is a stage that represents an intersection of life history with social history, and developmentally, it is a time when individuals confirm their own identities within a historical context. It is also the case that developmental trajectories and stages of the life cycle for children interact in significant ways with historical period. For example, Elder (1980) develops an interesting argument regarding the linkage between social changes and the life-cycle definition of adolescence, which has a more general applicability to the issues being addressed here. He suggests that in a society characterized by a lengthy youthful stage in which the individual experiences a great deal of independence and a period of flexibility and openness to change, it may be reasonable to theorize about the lifelong impact of youthful socialization experiences (see Alwin, 1994; Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991).

On the other hand, in a society characterized by a rather abrupt transition from childhood to adulthood, with fewer choices open to the individual, there may not be such a youthful stage during which the individual is preoccupied with the pursuit of identity and autonomy (Kett, 1977; Shanahan, 2000). Elder’s (1980; Elder, Caspi, & Burton, 1988) argument illustrates the great value of recent theorizing with respect to the consideration of the interaction of social change and life-span development, and his recent collaborative project on the implications of a changing society for children’s growth and development is a landmark accomplishment (Elder, Modell, & Parke, 1993). From an historical perspective the life course period of youth can be quite malleable. Modell (1989, p. 26) argues that the transformation in the transition to adulthood in American society over the 20th century “underlines much of the enlarged *salience* of the youthful life course ... [reinforcing the view that] ... the way one grows up is closely related to what one becomes.”

One of the classic studies in sociology that illustrates these points was carried out in the 1930s and 1940s by Theodore Newcomb at Bennington College, then a newly formed women’s college in southwestern Vermont. The young women who attended Bennington at that time came primarily from conservative backgrounds. By contrast, the faculty members were notably *progressive* in their economic and political views. Newcomb observed that the longer the young women stayed at Bennington, the more their political and economic views changed in the direction of the more liberal faculty. He concluded that young adulthood is constituted in terms of an openness to identity formation and change and that the individual’s immediate environment plays a powerful role in shaping their views (Newcomb, 1943). His theoretical insights into the processes by which responses to social change are shaped by the individual’s immediate environment have since become incorporated into social psychological perspectives on human development. It is now commonplace to assume that an individual’s reference groups mediate and interpret the influences of social and political events (see Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991).

There is also some indirect evidence to support the conclusion that youth is a particularly impressionable time when people’s experiences are highly salient. When older adults are asked in laboratory settings to provide autobiographical memories from their lives without restrictions to the content or time period, they show a preponderance of memories for events

that occurred during their adolescence and early adulthood (Rubin, 1999). In addition, when people are asked in surveys to report the most important event or change in the past half-century, there is often a heightened tendency to report things that occurred when they were young, say 10–30 years old (Schuman & Scott, 1989; Scott & Zac, 1993). Thus, there is some tangible support for the idea that youth is a particularly impressionable period, insofar as memories of youthful experiences often seem to be the most salient.

The Stability of Individual Differences over the Life Span

Youth does appear, then, to be an impressionable period in the life course, where there is considerably more openness to change compared to other stages in life. Indeed, many hold that not only is youth an impressionable period, but that these early experiences are the most powerful in terms of their lasting influences on human tendencies. Some would even put the period of “openness” much earlier. Sears (1981) recounts the story told about the Jesuits, who believed that they could control a person’s thinking for life if they were able to control their education up to the age of 7 years. Such a view is echoed in the words of Bertrand Russell in his book *Education*, published in 1926, quoted by Frank Musgrove in the following:

education of character “ought to be nearly complete by the age of six.” Courage was an important virtue, but there was nothing that schools could do about this—it had already been done in the home and “One generation of fearless women could transform the world...” (Musgrove, 1977, p. 215)

Another picture of human development is frequently drawn that establishes some aspects of the individual’s personality to be established somewhat later in life, not until age 30 or 35 years, but then set “like plaster” throughout the remainder of the life span (James, 1950/1890, p. 121). This has become the preferred metaphor for personality researchers who believe that measured dispositions for behavior are highly stable in adult life (Costa & McRae, 1994).

How stable are individuals over their lives, subsequent to early periods of socialization? Or, put another way, how stable are differences among individuals over time? The relationship between aging and human stability is not very well understood, although we have been learning more. The stability patterns of individual differences are capable of following any number of different trajectories. Alwin (1994, 1995) described six different phenotypic models of human stability—(a) the persistence model, (b) the lifelong-openness model, (c) the increasing persistence model, (d) the impressionable-years model, (e) the midlife-stability model, and (f) the decreasing persistence model. These are shown in Figure 2-2 in which each depiction of the magnitude of stability is charted with respect to age in adulthood. What is depicted is the expected level of *molar stability* in a particular segment of the life span under a particular stability regime. These quantities reflect degrees of stability in individual differences as expressed in the rate of change in a particular attribute for an age-homogenous cohort over a specified interval of time (see Alwin, 1994, pp. 139–140). For convenience we are here using a set of 8-year periods to gauge hypothetical levels of *molar stability* across life-span intervals of equal length.

In Model A, which is referred to as the *persistence model*, a uniformly high level of stability is depicted over each segment of the adult life cycle. In this first model the expected magnitude, on a scale ranging from 0 to 1, over each such 8-year period depicts a high level of stability that is uniform with respect to age. Traits for which such patterns are observed would seemingly represent a very high level of stability in individual differences across the entire adult life span. For many human characteristics, such as cognitive and intellectual abilities, various

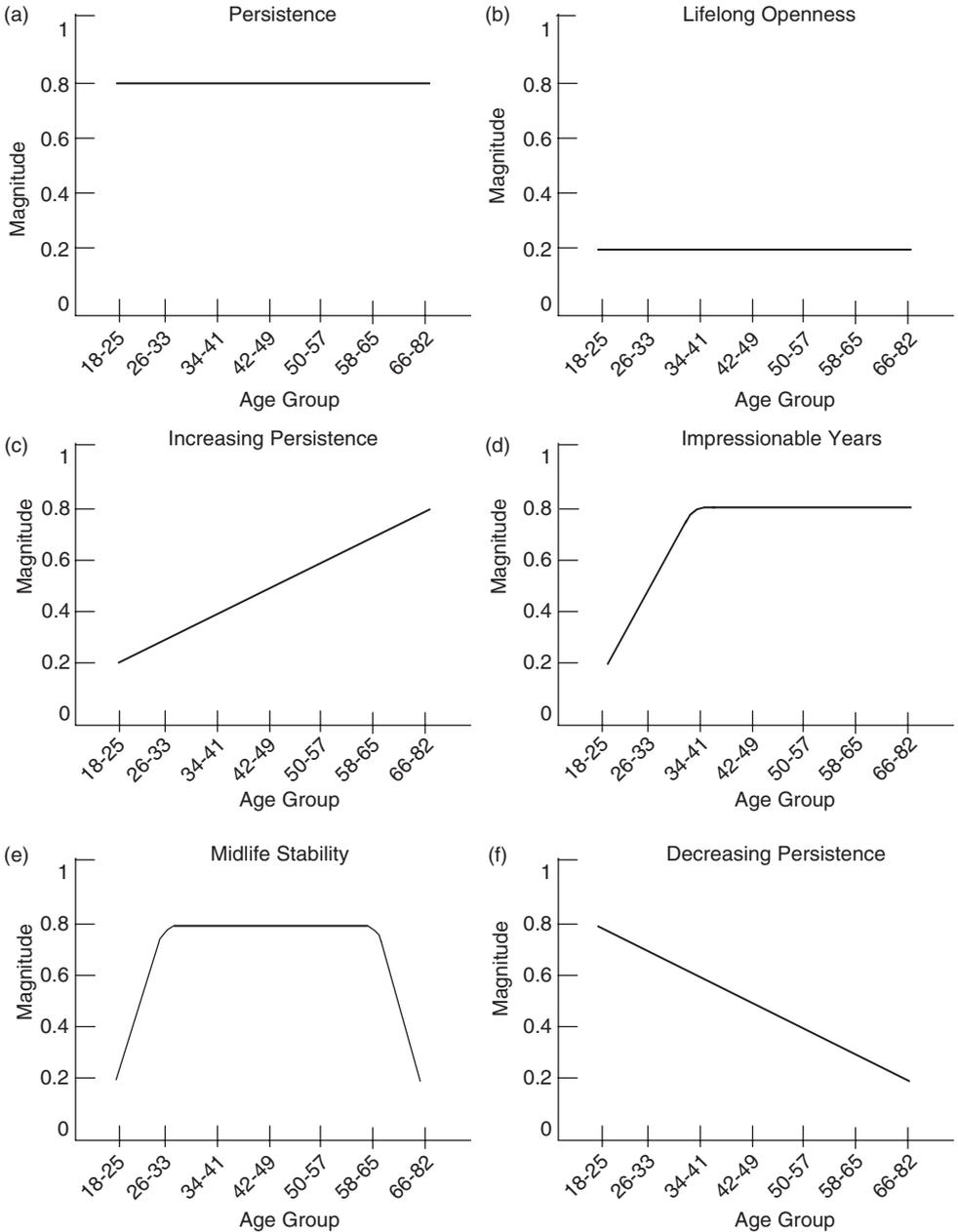


FIGURE 2-2. Models of human stability over the adult life span.

aspects of identities, and some personality traits, there is a strong empirical basis for assuming high levels of stability after adolescence and early adulthood (Alwin, 1994, pp. 159–164). One such domain with high levels of stability of individual differences is intellectual ability. There is a great deal of evidence that individual differences in cognitive test scores grow in stability in adolescence and are quite stable over even rather lengthy periods of the life span

(Alwin, McCammon, & Wray, 2000; Arbuckle, Gold, & Andres, 1986; Hertzog & Schaie, 1986; Kohn & Schooler, 1978; Nesselroade & Baltes, 1974). Another such domain with high levels of stability of individual differences is personality traits, where research suggests that personality traits increase in relative stability in adolescence (Nesselroade & Baltes, 1974) and grow to high levels of stability in adulthood, with little increase in stability over most of the adult life span (Costa & McCrae, 1980, 1994; Costa, McCrae, & Arenberg, 1980, 1983).

Citing the lack of evidence for high degrees of stability after early adulthood in many other aspects of individual functioning, Gergen (1980) proposed a model for stability that calls attention to the inherent potential for adjustment and adaptation to changes in the social environment. The depiction of stability in Model B—here referred to as the *lifelong openness model*—represents a developmental pattern that is consistent with a view of life as full of adaptation and change. In Gergen's (1980) words, in this model "existing (developmental) patterns appear potentially evanescent, the unstable result of the particular juxtaposition of contemporary historical events. For any individual the life course seems fundamentally open-ended. Even with full knowledge of the individual's past experience, one can render little more than a probabilistic account of the broad contours of future development" (Gergen, 1980, pp. 34–35). The depiction of stability in Model B similarly reveals a great degree of uniformity in stability with respect to age, but at a much lower magnitude. In this model there is considerable individual flexibility and change during young adulthood, but the degree of change is just as likely in all segments of the life span as it is in young adulthood. The interpretation of patterns of stability in terms of lifelong openness does not always require such a low magnitude of stability, and many use this phrase to describe patterns of stability that are much higher (e.g., Jennings & Niemi, 1981). Writing about the stability of personality (see above), Ardel (2000) argues that the prevailing view of high degrees of stability in personality is an exaggeration, and that the *lifelong openness* model is a more accurate response to the question: Can personality change? (Heatheron & Weinberger, 1994).

For some human attributes neither of these models is thought to fit the developmental pattern. In the quote given above from James (1950/1890), suggesting that personality or "character" is not fully established until early adulthood and that influence from the environment persists through early adulthood, another model of stability is indicated. Figure 2-2 depicts two models (Models D and E) that portray high levels of change in young adulthood, but with a growth in stability reaching a high level thereafter and leveling off through midlife. In Model D—the *impressionable years model*—stability remains relatively high throughout the remainder of the life span (Sears, 1981, 1983). This model represents what we take to be the most prominent view of the relationship between individual development and macrosocial change. The *impressionable years* model suggests that through late childhood and early adolescence, human characteristics are still quite malleable, with many experiencing increases in strength through early adult socialization, but with the potential for dramatic change still possible in late adolescence or early adulthood. However, once this period of early sorting and sifting is over, differences in individual characteristics are highly persistent throughout the life span. In Model E—the *midlife stability model*—by contrast, stability levels similarly reach a high level through midlife, but return to "youthful" levels in old age. During midlife people have a range of commitments—to a job, a marriage, a place of residence, to a set of organizational memberships—but when they move into old age they often find themselves in an altered set of social arrangements, due to retirement, death or change in their spouse, a changing residential location, and changing organizational commitments. These changes in social network ties may parallel the instability of relationships in youth and may consequently alter their beliefs, attitudes or values (see Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991).

Two additional models of age-graded human stability depicted in Figure 2-2 portray processes of more or less linear (or at least monotonic) increases or decreases in human stability over time. The *aging stability* or *increasing persistence* model (see Model C in Figure 2-2) is critically different from the preceding two models, in that it posits continued changes over time in the level of stability. A final model (Model F) reverses the process of change by positing a process of *aging-instability* or *decreasing persistence*, a loosening up of behavioral tendencies over time.

The model *increasing persistence model* is quite common in many discussions of age and stability (e.g., Glenn, 1980; Lorence & Mortimer, 1985; Mortimer, Finch, & Murayama, 1988; Mortimer et al., 1982). Writing specifically about attitudes, Sears (1981), for example, suggested that with time an “affective mass” is developed in the attitude structure, making “change progressively more difficult with age” (pp. 186–187). Although we describe such a model as linear, it need not be so. Sears and his colleagues (Sears & Weber, 1988) suggest that political socialization may actually proceed in “fits and starts,” reflecting a more jagged or steplike, relationship with time, but the net relationship between age and stability would be monotonically increasing. In a recent study of a nationally representative panel of youth, for example, Johnson (2001) found evidence of growing stability in job values during the transition to adulthood.

With regard to central beliefs or identities—such as “Who am I?” and “What do I most value?”—people are highly stable after a period of early socialization and the *impressionable years* model is probably the most applicable. For example, following their collegiate experiences the Bennington women just described were highly stable in their basic political identities over more than 50 years in their lives. Using data from Newcombs’s 1960s follow-up study of the original Bennington women studied in the 1930s (Newcomb, Koenig, Flacks, & Warwick, 1967), and our 1984 follow up of the same group (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991), we found that political identities that had developed in young adulthood had gained considerable strength and continued with a rather high degree of persistence into old age. Similar results are reported by Sears and Funk (1990) in a longitudinal study of the political attitudes and identities held by a large sample of Americans originally recruited as children in the Terman Gifted Children Study. They studied two aspects of the self—political party identification and political ideology—measured at four times between 1940 and 1977. They found a high degree of stability in these dimensions across the 37-year period of the studies. Similarly, other studies of political identities using synthetic cohorts report a consistent set of findings, namely that stabilities in political identities are lowest in young adulthood and grow in magnitude to a very high level in midlife and remain relatively high throughout the life span (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991; Alwin & Krosnick, 1991).

Researchers find much less stability as they move away from studying those more cognitively central beliefs and dispositions toward those attitudes and opinions that lie on the surface of cognitive structure. Individuals change their beliefs and attitudes, often in response to major social movements and events. Substantial changes in beliefs and attitudes about sex-roles, for example, have been witnessed within cohorts over the past two decades in response to the women’s movement and political events surrounding it. The same was true of changes in racial attitudes in response to the Civil Rights movement and its aftermath. Thus, while there may be unique influences occurring during people’s youth that leave an indelible mark on their characteristic modes of thought and experience, this may not necessarily be true for more superficial expressions of those orientations which we find in their attitudes and opinions. Work on the life-span stability of beliefs, attitudes, and subjective self-assessments, suggests that such dimensions tend to follow the *midlife stability* pattern (Alwin & Krosnick, 1991; Krosnick & Alwin, 1989; Alwin, 2001).

Evidence for Cohort Replacement in Social Change

Are there cohort differences in people's basic beliefs and orientations that are attributable to the unique exposure to historical events? Major events like wars, depressions, technological change, and so forth, which affect everyone in the population are probably *not* going to be recognizable as cohort effects because they tend to affect everyone, not just the young. As noted earlier, we reserve the term "period effects" for the effects of change agents that have a more pervasive effect on society as a whole. Of course, if these events primarily affect the young, then we will presumably be able to detect their impact, and if the residues of their effects persist, we have the making of a cohort effect. There are some aspects of wars that only affect the young, since they are the ones that have to fight them, and certainly the economic orientations of young people growing up during periods of prosperity may be quite different than those of their elders. The point is that cohort effects stemming from historical events may be relatively difficult to isolate in the face of period influences, despite the presence of apparent effects on the most recent cohorts. The main problem confronting the cohort analyst, however, is that cohort is almost inextricably confounded with age in the kinds of data social scientists use to examine such matters (Campbell, Abolafia, & Maddox, 1985).

Despite these difficulties, cohort replacement has been offered as an explanation for social changes across a wide range of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, including the realms of politics, religion, family, race, gender, morality, and test scores, to name just a few. There is hardly any social phenomenon that has not been subject to the kind of generational theorizing that is the focus of this chapter, and the concept of "cohort" is arguably one of the most popular explanatory devices used in contemporary social research. Research and scholarship over the past few decades has debated the evidence for cohort replacement effects on a number of different topics, including church attendance (Alwin & McCammon, 2003; Chaves, 1989; Firebaugh & Harley, 1991; Greeley, 1989; Hout & Greeley, 1987), religious orientations (Roof, 1999), belief in an afterlife (Greeley & Hout, 1999), beliefs about abortion (Scott, 1998), sex role beliefs and attitudes (Alwin, 2002b; Alwin, Scott, & Braun, 1996; Alwin, 2002b; Brewster & Padavic, 2000; Mason & Lu, 1988; Neve, 1992, 1995; Scott, Alwin, & Braun, 1996), child-rearing values (Alwin, 1989, 1996c), co-residence beliefs (Alwin, 1996b), job satisfaction (Firebaugh & Harley, 1995), racial beliefs and prejudice (Firebaugh & Davis, 1988; Schuman et al., 1997), electoral behavior (Firebaugh & Chen, 1995), political partisanship (Alwin, 1992, 1998a, 1998b; Converse, 1976), post-materialism values (Inglehart, 1977, 1986, 1990), intergenerational obligations (Bengtson & Cutler, 1976; Rossi & Rossi, 1990), political tolerance (Davis, 1975; Stouffer, 1955), vocabulary knowledge (Alwin, 1991; Alwin & McCammon, 1999, 2001), mass media consumption (Glenn, 1994), heritability of some behaviors (Shanahan, Hofer, & Shanahan, this volume), autobiographical memories (Schuman & Scott, 1989; Schuman & Rieger, 1992; Schuman, Rieger, & Gaidys, 1994; Scott & Zac, 1993), and a range of family and demographic phenomena (Cherlin, 1992; Lesthaeghe, 1996; Modell, 1989). Despite the apparent extensiveness of this list, we are confident that this bibliographic reconnaissance merely skims the surface of the existing research terrain dealing with cohort replacement effects.

The most extensive effort to date to identify the presence of cohort effects and their impact on social change via cohort replacement is seen in the work of James Davis, the progenitor of the GSS (Davis, 1992, 1996). Analyzing social change primarily in terms of the liberal/conservative dimension underlying social attitudes, Davis has found a general trend in the liberal direction across cohorts—a broad shift he calls the "great 'liberal' shift since World War II". The aggregate shift, he argues, hides the dynamics of the cohort replacement

phenomenon, because within cohorts Davis finds a “conservative trend between the early and late 1970s and a liberal ‘rebound’ in the 1980s”. The cohort succession results in Davis’s analysis point in the direction of a cumulative liberal cohort replacement contribution to the aggregate shift, and these patterns are largely consistent with results from the studies cited above on topics such as abortion, sex roles, racial attitudes, and the like.

As noted above, a major difficulty with any interpretation that lends support to the evidence for cohort replacement effects is that such results are almost always subject to alternative explanations. This stems from the complexity introduced by the age-period-cohort confounding mentioned above, owing to the fact that the interpretation of data potentially containing age, period, and cohort effects, must assume away at least one of these three influences to arrive at a conclusion (see the chapter by Glenn in this volume). In many instances, for example, the effects of aging on attitudes and beliefs are assumed to be nonexistent (or at least ignored). In this case the cohort replacement effects apparent cross-sectionally can more readily be interpreted as due to cohort effects (rather than age composition effects) and any intracohort trends then can be interpreted as period effects (see Alwin & Scott, 1996). Or, to take another example, if one is able to assume that period effects do not exist, then any observed intracohort shifts can be seen as due solely to aging, and given this, the cross-sectional data can then be rendered in such a way as to isolate cohort effects (see Alwin & McCammon, 1999, 2001). The point here is that while we may believe that there is a preponderance of evidence in support of cohort replacement effects, such interpretations usually come at the expense of some type of (usually unstated) assumption regarding the nature of age and/or period effects.

EVIDENCE FOR GENERATIONAL IDENTITIES

Earlier, we defined Generations as groups of people sharing a distinctive culture or identity by virtue of having experienced the same historical events at *approximately* the same time in their lives. As such, Generations are distinct historical phenomena, which do not map neatly to birth cohort, or even to a fixed number of birth cohorts. Unlike cohort, Generations do not enjoy a fixed metric that easily lends itself to statistical analysis. Rather, the distinction between Generations is a matter of quality, not degree, and the temporal location of their boundaries cannot be easily identified, particularly without the context of a set of particular analytic questions. Rosow (1978) suggests that incisive historical events may distinguish Generations, but that when such events “are soft and indistinct, (Generations) ... may be clearest at their centers, but blurred and fuzzy at the edges. They may remain so as long as transitional events are still gathering force, but a new (Generation) ... has not yet blossomed” (p. 69). Similarly, Mannheim (1952) suggests that distinctive Generations may fail to materialize for long periods of time should economic and social conditions remain stable, such that “largely static ... communities like the peasantry display no such phenomenon as new generation units sharply set off from their predecessors ... the tempo of change is so gradual that new generations evolve ... without any visible break” (Mannheim, 1952, p. 309).

Further complicating the study of Generations is the fact that they are not monolithic, homogenous groupings of all members of a set of birth cohorts, but instead are divided into what Mannheim called “generational units”, the division of a Generation by social position and level of involvement in the events of the day. How these subgroupings are identified and understood is again contingent on the substantive questions at hand, as Generations do not

exist in a vacuum, operating in the same way at all times for all members. Rather, like all good sociological variables, Generational experiences differ by social position and the corresponding differential experience of events based on those contexts. The Civil Rights movement in the United States was largely carried out by the youth of the era, and there are clear Generational identities associated with the movement, but the content of this identity obviously varies along geographic and racial dimensions. Similarly, the Vietnam War was a defining experience for the so-called Baby Boom generation, but the imprint of the war on identity for a conscientious objector who fled the country was vastly different than for his shared cohort counterpart that experienced the war as a soldier in Hanoi (Hagan, 2001). Both may have Generational identities linked to the war, but those identities are far from uniform. In contrast to cohorts, which have extremely broad coverage and precise boundaries, but lack specific explanations for the phenomena to which they are related, Generations lack specific boundaries and are meaningful in their distinctiveness largely as subpopulations, but offer the potential of being used as powerful explanations in and of themselves for distinctive patterns of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

Given these distinctions between Generations and cohorts, what then is the basis of their interrelatedness, and how do we get from one to the other? White (1992), argues that, “Cohort can turn into (G)eneration only if there is some previous (G)eneration, and then only as previous (G)enerations—and the concerns they wrap around—are moved out of the way” (p. 32). Thus, Generations are frequently formed through identification with and participation in youth-based social movements that cohere around a particular event or the conditions left to them by a previous generation. While this seems a compelling enough mechanism for the formation of Generations, there is also the potential for Generational units to influence their cohort contemporaries in ways that may manifest themselves as cohort effects, or more importantly as period effects. The effects of the Civil Rights activists of the early 1960s on their contemporaries and the country as a whole provide an excellent example of this (see McAdam, 1988). Another example of this is when cohort experiences produce Generational units that lead to revolutions. The origins of the political events in the late 1950s in Cuba, for example, that embodied the formation of Castro’s Revolutionary Generation and the fall of Batista’s dictatorship can be seen in the youthful experiences of Castro and his contemporaries who grew up during a period of relative political democracy and economic stability (Zeitlin, 1967). At the same time, the social movement that formed the Revolutionary Government in 1959 and established several political changes, including the nationalization of industry and the declaration of a “socialist” regime, clearly had consequences that dramatically shaped the experiences of multiple sets of later cohorts.

In the end, we must concede that modern social science has done a better job of documenting, if not explaining, cohort replacement effects on social change than it has in articulating the historical moments that bring definition to Generational units in the sense of Mannheim, and in providing a meaningful set of methodological tools for understanding and demonstrating their importance.

CONCLUSIONS

Social scientists have long recognized the potential value of theories postulating the *succession of generations*, or what others call *cohort turnover*, in understanding the nature of social change. In this chapter we have reviewed the basic concepts that underlie this theory and have attempted to add some clarity to the discussion of the interpretive meaning of the concepts of

generations and *cohorts*. In contrast to Kertzer (1983) we do not see the importance of phrasing the terminological distinction between generations and cohort as a zero-sum competition among historical theorists on the one hand and life course analysts on the other. The concept of generation is first and foremost a kinship term referring to discrete stages in the natural line of descent from a common ancestor, and we agree that this concept should not be confused either theoretically or operationally with the idea of cohort, which is normally used to refer to when one is born in historical time. Many have noted that the concept of generation as kinship location does not correspond in any neat manner to the historical process at the macro-social level because individuals differ in their rates of reproduction and because the temporal gap between generations is variable across families. At the same time we have argued that there is also room for more than one meaning of the term “generation”, and the concept of Generation as used by Mannheim, Ortega y Gasset and their followers to refer to groups of people who share a distinctive culture and/or a self-conscious identity by virtue of their having experienced the same historical events at the same time is, sociologically speaking, of great importance. This notion of Generation is very different from the idea of cohort (recall that when used in this manner in the current essay we capitalize Generation). While cohort may be related to Generation in that they both refer to the location of individuals in historical time, this commonality does not make them equivalent. In using the concept of Generation in reference to social change and the historical process Mannheim and Ortega y Gasset were referring to much more than cohort effects. There may clearly be cohort effects in the absence of any subjective attachment to a social movement or an identification of the self with a particular era. We do not diminish the usefulness of the concept of cohort as a tool for understanding social change by insisting that it differs from Generation. Nor do we necessarily extol the concept of Generation by arguing, with Mannheim and Ortega y Gasset, that it involves much more than cohort effects. The value of either concept depends on the empirical evidence to support it.

This has meant that when we refer to cohort replacement as a mechanism of social change we mean something very different from generational replacement or Generational replacement. In the course of this discussion we have limited ourselves primarily to a consideration of the utility of a cohort replacement model of social change and have considered several elements of this model and the evidence that exists in support of them. While many of the pieces of this theoretical model seem to accord with the empirical world, there are many instances wherein the data are less clear-cut. We find some support for the idea that social change occurs at least in part through cohort replacement and that society changes in the direction of more recent cohorts. The analyst describing society at any given time will take cohort differences into account in coming up with an aggregate representation of society. However, cohorts differ in their size, and those largest cohorts will dominate the snapshot. But, if there are no major differences among cohorts (as in the example of *trust in government*), the cohort composition of society will hardly be of any consequence.

Where there are cohort differences that persist, however, we can expect that these will be reflected in social change. For example, by its sheer size alone the Baby Boom cohorts and their tendency toward liberal positions on a range of political and social issues would seem to be having major impacts on trends in political beliefs and behavior well into the next century, as a function of cohort replacement. But even here, with the passage of time the Baby Boom cohorts may not be all that distinctive (Alwin, 1998b). Whatever differences that may have formerly existed may not persist over time, due to the influences of historical factors and the potential effects of aging. In other words, some of the recent shifts toward political conservatism in American society may not be due to cohort differences and cohort replacement, but

rather may be due to individual change or aging. This seems to be the case in the example showing that the Baby Boomers may be growing more conservative with age. This argues in favor of the alternative view: that members of particular cohorts or generations do not necessarily differ uniformly in their social experiences, that individuals are not particularly stable over their lives, and that social change results as much from aggregate changes within society, indeed within cohorts, via shifts in individual lives due either to aging or macrolevel historical (or period) effects.

Before we leave it at that, however, we should recognize that these matters are often more complex than they appear, and there is much more that can be said. As we argued above, it may be that the effects of age, cohort, and period factors may operate in countervailing ways. So yes, there may be cohort differences in social beliefs and attitudes that contribute to cohort replacement, but the within-cohort shifts are often just as great, and in some cases cancel out change due to cohort turnover. On balance, while there is relatively clear evidence for some contribution of cohort replacement to social change, the source of the underlying cohort effects is not always clear, and in many cases there is much more change that occurs within cohorts. Thus, while we find some support for the cohort replacement model of social change in some instances, there is also plenty of support for alternative views.

For all the attention in recent years to the historical influences on the life course, we find it surprising that most all of this work can be characterized by a unidirectional relationship between the individual and society. Traditionally in social psychology, it has often been assumed that there was a unidirectional pattern to socialization, with influences moving from the environment to the individual. Sociohistorical events and processes are often conceptualized within models of the life course in this way, as unidirectional influences on the lives of individuals (e.g., see Modell's [1989] commentary on Elder, 1975). This traditional framework legitimizes the study of cohort effects and cohort replacement, as embodying the historical influences on people at particular points in their life cycles. On the other hand, many now accept Bronfenbrenner's (1979) argument about reciprocal influences between the individual and his or her environment. Theories of socialization and the life course cannot ignore the ways in which individuals influence their environments—their societies—and are not simply passive recipients of culture (Alwin, 1995).

However desirable it might be to trace the reverse relationship, the impact of the individual on society, it is not all that straightforward. To do so students of the life course must step out of the unidirectional "box" that characterizes the majority of research on the life course and embrace the concept of *agency* as conceptualized in contemporary sociological theories (see Sewell, 1992). A move in this direction will perhaps bring them to the concept of Generations (in the sense of Mannheim) as an embodiment of cohorts as agents of social change. Rather than rejecting the idea of Generations because it does not map neatly to the concept of birth cohort or sets of birth cohorts or because it does not easily lend itself to statistical analysis, students of the life course can benefit from further research on Generations, as groups of people sharing a distinctive culture or identity who compete with others for dominance. We noted above that modern social science has done a better job of studying and documenting cohort replacement effects than it has of articulating and understanding the nature of Generation effects in the sense of Mannheim. Perhaps future life course research on cohorts and Generations will do a better job of demonstrating the importance of both cohort and Generational influences on society than has heretofore been the case.

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