

SYMPOSIUM

Symposium on Richard A. Settersten Jr., Glen H. Elder Jr., and Lisa D. Pearce's *Living on the Edge: An American Generation's Journey Through the Twentieth Century*

Abstract

Living on the Edge: An American Generation's Journey through the Twentieth Century (University of Chicago Press, 2021) tells the story of the rarely studied 1900 generation, from their social origins to their old age, as they coped with and adapted to the revolutionary changes of the last century. Using longitudinal data from the Berkeley Guidance Study, the authors followed 420 parents (210 couples) born between 1885 and 1908, all of whom had children born in Berkeley between 1928–29. The analyses, which often challenge conventional wisdom, reveal their status as a “hinge generation,” or bridge, between past and present in their educational, work, and family experiences. Following highlights from the authors, four scholars offer critical commentary on the book. Matt Nelson addresses challenges related to analyzing kinship networks and patterns of economic assistance across the Great Depression era, pointing to measurement limitations that obscure important forms of aid. Kelly Condit-Shrestha raises concerns related to race and ethnicity, especially the absence of Black, American Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and Hispanic persons in the original study, as well as to westward migration, American Empire, and white-settler colonialism. Silvia Pedraza addresses crucial social class differences (middle class versus working class) in the expectations and experiences of women, calling for greater clarity in the relationship between women's roles and notions of “respectability.” Finally, Evan Roberts takes up some of the complex methodological issues involved in leveraging historical data to understand the life course and identifying the uniquely disruptive nature of social change across generations and countries.

Summary of *Living on the Edge: An American Generation's Journey Through the Twentieth Century*

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We are unsettled to the very roots of our being . . . [We have] no precedents to guide us, no wisdom that wasn't made for a simpler age. We have changed our environment more quickly than we know how to change ourselves.

– Walter Lippmann, 1914, *Drift and Mastery*

Living on the Edge: An American Generation's Journey through the Twentieth Century (University of Chicago Press, 2021) tells the extraordinary lifelong story of the rarely studied 1900 American generation, from their social origins to their old age, as they encountered revolutionary social changes. This generation experienced mass migration, wartime, great swings in economic depression and prosperity, and unimaginable advances in science and technology. We wanted to understand how a rapidly changing world demanded that they adapt to and cope with change, and how it altered their lives in profound and even unforeseen ways.

Drawing on unparalleled data from the iconic Berkeley Guidance Study, we followed some 420 people (210 couples) born between 1885 and 1908 – members of the “1900 generation” – who were tracked by the Institute of Human Development at the University of California, Berkeley. The original study focused on their children, born in Berkeley in 1928–29. We relied on numerous data collection efforts, including frequent interviews, observations, and surveys between 1928 and 1947, and again in 1969 and the early 1980s.

This sample of individuals was almost entirely white, heterosexual, and married, reflecting the demographics of people living in Berkeley in the 1920s. There was, however, significant variation in nativity and immigration as well as social class. A few key analytic distinctions are repeatedly valuable: gender, as the life scripts of men and women were different and being reworked; social class (60% were middle class and 40% were working class); degree of deprivation during the Great Depression; generational status in the context of extended families; and cohort (those born in the 19th versus the 20th centuries).

The book's findings often challenge conventional wisdom, especially because social science relies heavily on survey data from the 1950s forward. We found that the 1900 generation represents what Leonard Cain (1967) called a “hinge generation”: they were drastically different from the generations before them, and they instigated changes that continued to evolve across later generations and persist today. This was true with respect to profound shifts in work, the growing separation of workplaces and homes, the expansion of higher education, married women's increasing labor force participation, greater egalitarianism in marriage, and new parenting styles. In fact, in reading the first-hand accounts of their lives, we were often struck by how modern their voices sounded.

The 1900 Generation Women were Pioneers in Shifting Gendered Roles in Work and Family

This generation came of age in the roaring 1920s, when access and attainment in education was sharply increasing. Fully 19% of women and 33% of men in our sample graduated from college. Opportunities for paid work and career development in the Bay area were abundant for men and unmarried women. Employment varied by education, social class, and gender, but with the median

age of marriage in the mid-20s, it was the norm for unmarried adults to work. Members of the study reflected fondly on these times. They liked their independence, earnings, and social lives.

When women married and had children, they almost universally quit working. Some interpret this as a choice to return to “traditional” women’s roles, but that is too simplistic for at least two reasons. First, there was not much choice in it. Women were socialized to expect this transition and rewarded for it. Their high school and college curricula emphasized female occupations before marriage and homemaking after marriage. Further, companies had policies against hiring married women and there was little to no infrastructure for childcare. Second, on the heels of having secured the right to vote, these women saw their potential for progress *inside* the domestic sphere. They expressed agency by redefining marriage as more companionate and parenthood as science-driven.

Men worked long hours away from home, many in factories or firms. As one of the men in the study noted, “When a husband and wife are separated a lot, like happens nowadays because of the nature of husband’s work, they tend to grow apart.” In the early 1900s, the spheres of economic provision and family life were being physically pulled apart and becoming heavily gendered. Men’s identities were fixed on personal financial success and women’s identities on taking care of others.

With the onset of Great Depression, however, many men lost jobs or had salaries cut. The loss of pay was hard on men because of the mandate that they be breadwinners. Women could fulfill their identities as caretakers by meeting their family’s needs. Female occupations were expanding, and many of the 1900 generation women had worked these jobs prior to marriage and could return as teachers, nurses, bookkeepers, or telephone operators. When men were pragmatic and appreciated wives’ work, marriages seemed strengthened. They said things like, “money was money” or “we didn’t have time to worry about whether women should work.”

Moving to World War II, scholars often focus on the widespread move of women into manual labor in wartime industries, epitomized by the image of “Rosie the Riveter.” In fact, those women were largely younger than the 1900 women and unmarried. The 1900 women filled the jobs left behind by the younger women. Women looked back on wartime nostalgically, especially recalling the camaraderie with female co-workers, whereas men looked back on these years as extraordinarily frenzied and stressful.

To our surprise, when we examined women’s pathways through work during three eras – before family formation, during the Great Depression, and during World War II – we found that women worked a lot more than one might expect of “traditional” women. An astounding proportion – 30% – were in the labor force in some capacity during all three eras. An equal percentage worked only prior to marriage – middle class women whose families faced little deprivation. Only 7% did not work in any of these eras.

The human capital that these women developed prior to marriage remained valuable thereafter. They worked non-family jobs in young adulthood, often lived on their own or with roommates, and earned their own money. In other words, they embraced egalitarianism. After marriage, quite a few worked, but it had to be excused as necessary for the family. Once the family need ceased, they were expected to leave the labor force and once again specialize in the domestic sphere. Women’s work was widely accepted as possible – and even enjoyable or rewarding – but

nonetheless temporary. We argue that this helped solidify the intertwined cultural frame of gender egalitarian essentialism that scholars claim is so recent. We demonstrate a far earlier development of this dualistic ideology.

The 1900 Generation Parents Set the Stage for the Intensive Childrearing of Today

The Berkeley Study archives allowed us to discover that the seeds of today's child-focused parenting can be found in the markedly different strategies of parents a century ago. This could especially be seen in the middle class parents of the 1900 generation. They were the first generation of parents to see landmark advances in the amount and quality of childrearing advice. Science related to child development emerged in the early 1920s, along with a commitment to conducting research to serve children and families. Couples were becoming more conscious of the role of fathers in the development of their children, and many of these men wanted to be better fathers and husbands.

Parenting was starting to be understood as a skill to be learned and mastered. Parents provided opportunities to children that they did not themselves have: music, art, and dancing lessons; clothes and toys; better nutrition, education, and health care; more involved parents, less troubled family relationships, and greater economic security.

Several parents said that their generation had actively decided to have fewer children to invest more in each. As a middle class father noted, "parents used to have an easier time raising children because they didn't pay so much attention to them . . . They didn't give them all kinds of special lessons and worry over their adjustments. Our children have been tied up in one thing or another ever since they were born."

One downside to being better schooled in parenting was that they were more worried about their children's outcomes and their incompetence as parents. A middle-class mother observed, "previously, parents just let children grow up and hoped they turned out for the best; if they didn't, that was due to the child. Whereas parents of our generation worry over what *we* have done wrong."

These parents struggled with how to raise kids in a new world that offered greater mobility, plentiful temptations, and a compromised ability to exert parental influence, especially in the war-mobilized Bay area. Their greater knowledge left them aware of the inherently ambiguous and uncertain nature of parenting. Previous generations, they said, were so sure about what was "right" and consequently trained youngsters early to fit in with parents' demands. This might not have been good for children's development, but it was easier. In the words of one mother, "everybody was more comfortable in knowing precisely where the lines were drawn, and now, neither the parents nor the children know." The 1900 generation parents and their children were more open and willing to share with one another, shrinking the "generation gap."

The Lives of the 1900 Generation Show that Family Support During Hard Times Has Never Been Easy

Members of the 1900 generation were managing family life before the government programs of today were developed and when receiving "public aid" was deeply

stigmatizing. The relentless decade of the Depression meant relying on family members or finding support wherever one could. Four out of five families helped or were helped by relatives. Those who needed help felt embarrassment and shame. Those who gave help often did so with reservation, even resentment and hostility.

These tensions were especially strong in the middle class. The burden of giving help was carried by those who were spared unemployment and major income loss. Working class families were far more responsive to relatives in need, accepted burdens even in the most trying circumstances, and helped a wider network of family members. Patterns of kin help were generally slanted toward the wife's family in the middle class, and toward the husband's family in the working class.

Sharing housing was the least preferred way to help kin, but many had no choice. Over half hosted relatives at some point in the 1930s. In the working class, fully 75% of families hosted a parent or child. Most stays with relatives lasted more than 3 years.

Doubling up often meant bringing parents into their households. Grandmothers, especially, made for crowded households. They were seen as critical, irritable, and demanding, and brought battles over household authority – especially reflecting a clash of old and new perspectives on raising kids. This was especially true of households that included the husband's mother. As one wife put it, “grandmother can throw a wet blanket over the group faster than anyone I have ever seen.”

The lives of the 1900 generation ached of difficult choices in response to hardship: not having additional children, giving up homes, leaving possessions behind, making extraordinary reductions in consumption, losing social status, and hiding hardship from others to “save face.”

The Lives of the 1900 Generation Reveal the Power of the Past in Shaping Health and Well-being in Old Age

For the 1900 generation, old age is a story of women's perseverance: 75% of women lost husbands, largely to death, by the 1969–70 follow up, and even more by the early 1980s. This had to do with the link between Depression-era economic hardship, emotional distress, and health problems in men's lives. As couples, both wives and husbands experienced the same level of economic hardship, but men were held accountable for family economic misfortune. By contrast, wives generally experienced health gains and even personal growth, especially among those in the middle class. Nearly 25 years after the Great Depression, the wives among our surviving couples with a history of Depression hardship stood out as more agentic than their husbands.

When asked about their least satisfying years, the Depression era was uniformly mentioned as the worst time in life. But it had a double-edged quality: One edge was that it brought the prevalence of loss in life and its effects seemed to last interminably, especially in the working class. Another edge was that it was a time for building families and pleasures that came with it. Hard times brought families together and pulled them apart.

Conclusion

As we studied the lives of the 1900 generation, we were often struck by how much they had in common with generations born later in the 20th century: Social origins

and resources are important in determining life's directions and outcomes. Our lives are not really our own but are embedded in family relationships and interactions that shape us. All lives carry the imprint of their times but are intimately connected to generations past. Human beings are extremely resilient in the face of unexpected and often dramatic alterations in life circumstances. And every generation since 1900 has experienced a rapid social change that seems beyond its control. We write these words amid the COVID-19 pandemic that continues to ravage the world as well as the heightened civil and political unrest that reflects the sharp social and economic inequalities in our nation. *Living on the Edge* offers an intimate glimpse into not only the history of the United States and the feelings, dreams, and fears of the 1900 generation – but into the present day and ourselves.

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