


Giving and Receiving Aid: Kin Networks in the Great Depression

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Richard Settersten Jr., Glen Elder Jr., and Lisa Pearce's book *Living on the Edge: An American Generation's Journey Through the 20th Century* is a comprehensive study with origins dating to the 1960s. The authors look at how a rapidly changing society influenced the lives of 210 middle-class and working-class couples who were members of the 1900 generation. The 1900 generation was defined as those born between 1885 and 1908 who had children born in 1928–1929 were included in the longitudinal Berkeley Guidance Study led by Jean Walker McFarlane. The Berkeley Guidance Study included detailed interviews from 1930 to 1947 with follow-up interviews through the 1980s.

Settersten et al. were particularly interested in the generation's adaptation to two world wars and the swings of great economic prosperity and depression, which make up much of the book. The authors cover a multitude of topics and in many ways, I almost wish this book was longer to cover the topics more in depth. The authors explore many facets of family life; migration, marriage and marital quality, childbearing, parenting, labor force participation and views on work, economic assistance from kin, and doubling up to name a few. Instead of covering every topic, my comments focus specifically on their chapters looking at kinship networks and economic assistance.

The authors focus primarily on economic assistance between kin from 1929 to 1939 (when the bulk of their data was collected) and argue in favor of two models to describe kin economic assistance: a depression model and a life course model. The depression model is how most laypeople understand kin economic assistance. Kin helped in times of need, such as a loss of employment and poor health. A life course model alternatively describes assistance based on the age of individuals where younger individuals received aid because they just started out as independent families and possessed fewer resources than older more established families (and vice versa for giving aid). In particular, the authors emphasize the depression model but suggest that both models describe the 1900 generation's experience during the Great Depression.

The authors emphasize the depression model since most of the economic assistance measured spiked in the years of 1933 and 1936–1937, corresponding to the years of highest unemployment in the Great Depression but also diverged from the normative life course expectations of kin assistance. This result is most clear in the trends by class, but also in the trends by age cohort (older generation born before the turn of the century and the younger generation after). An interesting finding was the working- and middle-class differences in kin assistance. Specifically, working-class individuals interacted more with siblings (typically patrilineal) rather than parents regarding economic assistance, while middle-class individuals interacted more with parents (typically matrilineal). Further, working-class

couples more often received economic assistance from the husband's kin, while middle-class couples more likely gave assistance to the wife's kin. Economic aid was based on economic necessity, willingness and ability to provide aid, social class, local community culture, gendered expectations, age in the family life cycle, and personal relationships.

Their arguments on the depression model of economic assistance during the Great Depression are not necessarily overstated but because the focus was on the Great Depression, it obscures the importance of the life course model on kinship assistance. To provide an alternative example of the life course model, a study of Cleveland, Ohio by Sussman (1958) in 1956 showed more children received financial aid from parents in the previous month (47%) than aid received by the 1900 generation during the Great Depression (for whom the highest number was 25% of the working-class families in 1932–1933). This comparison requires caution in interpreting (different methodologies, unknown age range of the Sussman study, and different contexts in both space and time) but emphasizes the importance of financial aid even in times of plenty.

There is also clear evidence of the life course model in the Berkeley study that was not discussed. The authors argue that the normative life course was interrupted by the economic depression. The long-run trend over the decade for receiving aid however *declined* for younger families, suggesting that the shifts to the normative life course were only temporary as that is precisely what one would expect with the life course model. For giving aid, the depression model appears convincing as large increases in giving aid increased most during the economic recessions and remained relatively stable the rest of the decade. I suspect that giving aid as a part of the normative life course occurred later in life. Most aid flowed from parents to adult children, and none of the Berkeley 1900 generation couples had adult children prior to 1939. Since giving aid likely increased because of sibling unemployment, the aid corresponded more closely to a depression model.

Another exercise to consider regarding the life course model is the actual age cohorts rather than using generational labels of younger and older. For comparison, in 1939, the younger generation was a similar age (30–40 years old) as the older generation in 1929 (30–45 years old). Almost the same percentage of younger families by 1939 received aid as compared to the older generation in 1929 (approximately 10% for younger families in 1939 compared to 12% for the older generation in 1929). Giving aid was a little lower (8% for younger families in 1939 compared to 12% for the older generation in 1929), but the authors did not discuss this evidence of a life course model at length.

The effects of kin economic assistance were likely even higher in other parts of the country during the Great Depression. A small technical reason is the denominator likely overestimates persons in the Berkeley study who had living kin. California also experienced lower patrilineal kin propinquity than the rest of the United States, suggesting higher kinship assistance in other areas in the United States with more geographically integrated kinship networks. The authors' conclusions on kin economic assistance are convincing, but there are nuances of the life course model of kin assistance that were not elaborated on that oversimplifies the complex process of generational negotiation combined with the economic necessities of the Great Depression.

A point the authors recognize in the limitation of their primary source material is the silences regarding kinship assistance. The authors focused on economic assistance (although the amount of financial aid was not typically provided in the primary source interviews). Other types of assistance discussed briefly include caring for unhealthy individuals (typically children caring for parents when doubling up), caring for children (older generations and siblings to grandchildren), and reciprocal aid (11% of couples exchanged services or intangible resources). The general absence of some of these details surprises me given all the details on items such as marital quality were available. This represents a potentially important narrative on the changing nature of kinship relations. One question this raises is the reasons for not giving aid. Did families not give aid because they did not need to (kin were economically stable), could not give aid (economically unable to or did not have kin to give to), or did not want to (the authors provide evidence of this, especially for middle-class families).

One area the authors discussed in detail was the strains of kinship relations among the families who “doubled up” during times of economic stress. The Berkeley families tended to host family rather than residing in another kin’s household, and many coresidential arrangements lasted for three years or more. Most families hosted siblings (36%) but still hosted parents, typically matrilineal widowed mothers (23%). Often the couples’ parents tried to assert themselves in the household, which created tension between the generations, especially in middle-class households. This generational tension revolved around changing social roles for middle-class college educated women such as child-rearing and household chores.

To put this period into context, Ruggles (2007) argues that intergenerational coresidence of the elderly tended to be parents and children with higher occupational scores prior to 1920. After 1940, lower incomes and lower occupational scores were correlated with intergenerational coresidence. The timing of this transformation began before the Great Depression, but it is certainly possible the Great Depression affected or sped the transition already underway. For example, most of the Berkeley 1900 Generation hosted kin, which may be at odds with the national trends. However, the evidence of middle-class/working-class coresidence with parents coincides with the known evidence on intergenerational coresidence. Given the hostility toward parents the middle-class Berkeley families experienced with “doubling up,” there is an interesting question on perceptions of raising children, privacy, and independence in the shift of intergenerational coresidence toward less economically secure households after 1940 which could prove extremely fruitful for future research.

While the topics are far-reaching, I wonder how the authors’ findings apply more broadly. The 1900 Berkeley cohort represents a very particular cohort and geographic context. As the authors readily admit, Black, American Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and Hispanic persons are not represented in the Berkeley Guidance Study because of the demographics of Berkeley in 1928–1929 when the sample was selected.

Another question regards farm families (only 13% of the sample were raised in farm families). Farm families inhabit an interesting space regarding intergenerational and intragenerational relationships similar in ways to the middle-/working-class dynamics the authors argue in favor of. For example, farmers worked closely with siblings (given the amount of manual labor involved) which supports

working-class kinship dynamics. Land inheritance for many farm families, however, suggests a stronger intergenerational relationship with the parents. While kinship relationships were not a zero-sum game of only having a relationship with the parents or the siblings, I wonder how these generational relationships worked with and against each other in an agricultural context.

Acknowledgments. I want to thank Richard, Glen, and Lisa for this wonderful book. An extremely engaging read, their work makes a wonderful contribution to family history, migration history, and longitudinal studies.

References

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Race and Ethnicity in *Living on the Edge*: Teaching about a White American Generation’s Journey through the Twentieth Century

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Living on the Edge: An American Generation’s Journey through the 20th Century (2021) by Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Glen H. Elder, Jr., and Lisa D. Pierce, is a decades-in-the-making accomplishment. My comment on *Living on the Edge* is framed through my perspective as a US historian versed, particularly, in migration, childhood, critical race, and Asian American studies. *Living on the Edge* could find a home in a variety of classes. Its finding would prove remarkably useful in courses focused on, for example, the analysis of gender, comparative life course methods, and generational kinship economies. My comments focus on the issue of race and ethnicity in the study, particularly for the pedagogical potential of utilizing the monograph in a modern US survey.

Living on the Edge’s incredibly rich (and *longue durée*) compilation of longitudinal research, which draws from the well-known Berkeley Guidance Study, spans almost the exact time frame of a modern US survey course, which typically takes