

REVIEW

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

Richard A. Settersten Jr, Glen H. Elder Jr and Lisa D. Pearce, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2021, 392 pp., pbk US \$26.00, ISBN-13: 9780226748122

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Living on the Edge: An American Generation's Journey Through the Twentieth Century by Richard A. Settersten Jr, Glen H. Elder Jr and Lisa D. Pearce offers a unique account of the lives of more than 400 men and women born around the turn of the century and living in Berkeley, California. Glen Elder, renowned for the formulation of Life Course theory, is also known for his work with the Oakland children (1920–1921) which formed the basis for his book, *Children of the Great Depression* (1974). Located in the Berkeley Institute of Human Development, he worked alongside Jean Macfarlane, a clinical psychologist who initiated the Berkeley Guidance Study, a study of Berkeley children born 1928–1929. The original dataset comprised parental interviews about the children and other family information. In 1972, Elder revisited the Berkeley data with the intention of comparing it with the Oakland study. However, the enormous amounts of data available for the Berkeley cohort, extending into the 1960s, much of which was uncoded, led Elder to broaden the scope of his research. Beginning with the reflections of parents of the 1928–1929 cohort, Elder was able to focus the study on the 1900 generation.

The book presents the findings of this longitudinal study guided by the overarching question: 'How did this rapidly changing society influence the lives of middle-class and working-class Americans of the 1900 generation?' (p. 4). The study provides an innovative approach to analysing the vast dataset – observations, in-depth interviews, questionnaires, staff observations and ratings, and household inventories – which were never designed to ask questions about context. To address such concerns, therefore, Elder created contextual measures for the different historical periods. The result of his analysis is a complex historical account of the ways in which individuals interact within society across their lifecourse through processes of continuity and change. More than four decades later, in 2011, Elder began to collaborate with his colleague Lisa Pearce at the University of North Carolina, an expert in the sociology of family and gender, and with Richard Settersten at Oregon State University in writing the book. Settersten had previously worked

with the Oakland/Berkeley datasets and is a well-renowned scholar in relation to ageing and lifecourse studies.

The book consists of 13 chapters, framed within five parts, each representing a different historical period. Part 1, 'Entering an Unchartered World (Americans in a New Century – The 1900 Generation)', provides an introduction to the study. Though there is much to grasp, perhaps most importantly it places the study within the context of Macfarlane's original work.

Part 2, 'Making a Life – 1910–1930', consists of four chapters which collectively capture the early lives of the 1900 generation as precursors for their later experiences. The social origins of the 1900 generation and the journey they made with their parents to California are discussed in Chapter 2. Chapters 3 and 4 introduce the early lives of the Berkeley men and women, primarily focused upon their education and work. Chapter 5 considers patterns of marriage including attitudes, class differences and role preferences. Themes throughout include inequalities, social stratification and gender roles.

Part 3 of the book is concerned with life during 'The Depression Years: The Worst and Best of Times' and consists of four chapters. Chapter 6 is a focal point in the book, providing an account of the rapid shift in the lives of the Berkeley families as a result of the Depression and the effects of misfortune and privilege at this time. Thereafter, Chapter 7 considers the impact of economic loss on standards of living whilst Chapter 8 outlines couples' choices about extending their families and the impact of stress on parenting behaviours. Finally, Chapter 9 focuses on the kin assistance given or received by the Berkeley couples at times of hardship.

Part 4 turns attention away from the Great Depression and towards the impact of the Second World War in a section entitled 'War on the Home Front'. Beginning with a brief, but interesting, outline of the antecedents of America's involvement in the war, it moves on to three chapters that focus on the war effort by the 1900 Berkeley men and women, now in midlife and largely with teenage children (Chapter 10); female labour participation (Chapter 11); and generational changes in parenting as a result of new scientific developments (Chapter 12).

In the final chapter (Chapter 13), entitled 'Transforming Times and Lives (The Past in Later Life)', the focus turns to the latter years of the 1900 generation's lives and their health. This offers an opportunity to draw together the lifecourse of the Berkeley families and to establish them as members of a unique generation.

Living on the Edge aimed to consider the impact of a shifting 20th-century society in America upon the individual lives of the 1900 Berkeley generation and the generations that followed them. In drawing the book to a close, the authors return to the lifecourse principles which have guided the study, noting

Social origins and resources are important in determining life's directions and outcomes, alongside choices and actions. Our lives are not our own but are embedded in family relationships and interactions that shape us. And all lives carry the imprint of their times, distinguished by changes that punctuate an era. (p. 242)

The book is highly recommended and may be of particular interest to sociologists, psychologists, gerontologists and social historians. There is much to be gained by

the lay reader both from an American audience or beyond, perhaps having particular relevance to Westernised developed countries that experienced modernity and industrialisation in the 20th century. It is an exciting read and gives a real sense of connection with the lives of those who have gone before. It is also highly relevant in understanding the differential impact of national or global disasters on different members of a society and the potential for lifelong consequences.

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