

SHORT REPORT

Navigating the biosocial: perspectives of early career researchers working with birth cohorts.

Catherine Borra^{1,2} , Evangeline Tabor³ , Faith Cole^{4,5}  and Sarah Stock⁶ 

¹Social Research Institute, University College London (UCL), 27 Woburn Square, London WC1H 0AA, UK, ²Trauma and Orthopaedics, Barts Health NHS Trust, London, UK, ³Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Social Research Institute, University College London (UCL), London, UK, ⁴Department of Anthropology, University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Los Angeles, CA, USA, ⁵University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA and ⁶Institute of Epidemiology & Health, University College London (UCL), London, UK

Corresponding author: Catherine Borra; Email: catherine.borra.19@ucl.ac.uk

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Abstract

In recent years, there have been increasing calls for the development and growth of the biosocial as a paradigm through which to tackle complex problems. The use of birth cohorts, mixed methods frameworks, and interdisciplinary work are common in biosocial research. However, these practices are also theoretically and practically complex due to epistemic, methodological, and academic challenges – particularly for early career researchers (ECRs) who face time constraints, funding limitations, and disciplinary expectations.

This paper draws on lessons from the experiences of ECRs in biosocial research by reflecting on theoretical heterogeneity, the necessity of translation and negotiation across disciplines and methodologies, and the practicalities of funding, collaboration, and dissemination. Throughout, the paper discusses strategies to overcome common challenges and provide suggestions for fellow ECRs and those interested in biosocial ECR training and development. The paper highlights the importance of strong networks with senior biosocial researchers and peers, the value of practical support, and the importance of formal and informal learning opportunities. The authors call for the enthusiasm for biosocial research to be matched with investment in the development and support for ECRs.

Keywords: Biosocial research; interdisciplinary research; mixed methods research; epistemology; early career researchers; doctoral students; doctoral candidates; biosocial training; biosocial education

Introduction

The biosocial is an emerging framework which explores the complex relationships between social environments and human biology, often transcending the disciplinary silos and paradigms of the biological and social sciences (Meloni *et al.*, 2016). While there is no one ‘biosocial methodology’, often biosocial research associates biomarker data (such as genetics and hormones) with quantitative social data (Harris and McDade, 2018). Qualitative research has also been central to furthering questions and methodologies that explore the entanglements between social worlds and human biologies, as exemplified by Margaret Lock’s concept of ‘local biologies’ (Lock, 1993; Lock and Nguyen, 2010). Biosocial methodologies have also integrated qualitative and quantitative methods in a single project (Roberts and Sanz, 2018). As data-rich platforms, which follow participants from infancy or earlier into later in life (NCDS, 2024), birth cohort studies provide an

often interdisciplinary model to address human development and expand what can be considered biosocial methods. Birth cohorts have been at the forefront of understanding how the physical and social worlds get under the skin. Like other longitudinal methodologies, birth cohorts address changes happening over time and extend focus to the entire life course, which allow the study of changes to individuals and groups across their lives in a variety of ways (Gibbon and Pentecost, 2019). Interdisciplinary collaborations in birth cohorts have demonstrated how integrating data from across the biological-social divide can ‘*make better numbers*’, by leveraging ethnographic insights in epidemiological studies to formulate research questions and quantitative measures that are attuned to the lived realities of a particular place (Roberts, 2021). Similarly, the biosocial study of social-biological interactions can improve understanding of the pathways to increased disease burden, providing an operational model for birth cohort research (Singer *et al.*, 2017). However, biosocial birth cohort research presents particular theoretical and methodological challenges. This paper outlines the challenges pertinent to early career researchers (ECRs) – including PhD students, those within eight years of PhD award or within six years of their first academic appointment (UKRI, 2023) – based on the authors’ insights from the Biosocial Birth Cohort Early Career Researcher Workshop held at University College London in March 2023. The workshop convened an international group of twenty-two PhD students and post-doctoral fellows from the United Kingdom, Germany, Mexico, and the United States to reflect on their common and different experiences in biosocial research with birth cohorts. The disciplines represented included epidemiology, social science, public health, and anthropology – but most participants work across disciplines, employing mixed methods and conciliating different epistemologies. All workshop participants were members of the Biosocial Birth Cohort Research (BBCR) network, which brings together social scientists, geneticists, and epidemiologists who work alongside birth cohort studies (BBCR, 2024). These disciplinary viewpoints inform the range of challenges and strategies identified by the authors in subsequent meetings to consider the workshop outcomes. Authors consisted of a sub-group of the workshop participants (FC, SS) and two organisers (CB, ET) – the opportunity to join the team was extended to all workshop participants. In addition, participants were asked to complete a post-workshop feedback questionnaire about the most and least useful topics – this feedback was also considered, together with the authors’ workshop notes and personal experiences. The challenges the authors highlight speak to the ways biosocial ECRs move between multiple, and sometimes conflicting, disciplines, epistemologies, and methods. First, the authors reflect on the theoretical heterogeneity of biosocial birth cohort research as exciting but often intimidating and then discuss the impact of interdisciplinary and mixed methods work on researcher identity and the challenges of navigating interdisciplinary collaboration. Throughout, the authors consider strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Theoretical challenges of biosocial interdisciplinary research

Lack of a unified theoretical framework

The biosocial as an emerging paradigm lacks a defined universally agreed upon theoretical framework, with various approaches adopted by different researchers appropriate to the specificities of individual studies (Meloni *et al.*, 2016). The theoretical flexibility and freedom of the approach provides significant advantages, such as adaptation to new contexts and opportunities for ECRs to contribute to the development of biosocial theory. The diversity of theoretical contributions to biosocial research reflects the array of disciplines working in the space, including science and technology studies, bioscientists, sociologists, social and biological anthropologists, (social) epidemiologists, among others. Establishing one’s place in such a heterogeneous landscape requires reflexive and thoughtful work, which is demanding of time and effort, and requires skill, resources, and support.

Nonetheless, there is existing literature which can guide ECRs through the epistemological work that has been conducted on the biosocial (Ingold and Palsson, 2013; Meloni *et al.*, 2016). Workshop participants suggested that tools like curated reading lists can provide some theoretical orientation within specific project teams. In the case of birth cohorts, there may be documentation of previous collaborations using a biosocial framework, which may help steer a team's, project's, or dataset's particular theoretical orientation.

Competing epistemologies

Eigenbrode *et al.* 2007 call for greater engagement with the philosophical differences in cross-disciplinary, biosocial research (Eigenbrode *et al.*, 2007). Workshop participants had first-hand experiences of how epistemological challenges of biosocial endeavours manifest in methodological and practical challenges. Since biosocial research often requires interdisciplinary collaboration and ECRs rely on supervisors and other senior academics from different fields, there is the potential for competing epistemologies and disciplinary norms to cause confusion (at best) and conflict (at worst). Each discipline has standards that it upholds, which include background assumptions on how the world works (Eigenbrode *et al.*, 2007). An example is the difference between a mechanistic science like statistics and a rhizomatic science like anthropology, which is reflected in their methods (specific in the former, iterative in the latter) and research questions (closed in the former, open-ended in the latter). For instance, in tackling an issue like the emergence of psychosis, statistics will be able to express clear trends in prevalence (answering a 'how many' question) while anthropology might summarise common themes in the experiences of people using healthcare services (answering a 'how' question) – both missing the opportunity to reflect on why psychosis is more prevalent in certain groups which a biosocial lens would lend itself to. These characterisations about disciplinary practices are simplifications – while certain approaches are more common in certain disciplines, many scholars within a particular discipline employ multiple methodologies and epistemologies to pursue their research questions. Indeed, biosocial research is often at the forefront of destabilising disciplinary boundaries and standard practices. While the authors believe methodological creativity to be a strength of biosocial research, it can also lead to challenges for training. Workshop participants reported issues reaching a common understanding and buy-in to the biosocial as a shared paradigm, especially as not all academics are familiar with biosocial literature, and drastically different methodologies can all be considered biosocial. Confusion may arise when different supervisors employ different paradigms of biosocial research or have little familiarity with biosocial frameworks. As ECRs, participants did not feel skilled at balancing the competing interests of senior colleagues and feared losing support from or dissatisfying advisors. This experience can be isolating. Nonetheless, one workshop participant commented on the experience of working within an existing mixed methods interdisciplinary birth cohort, where team members jointly discussed epistemological and methodological issues and presented a working framework for collaboration, which was a useful learning experience and removed the stress of having to navigate these issues first hand as a junior academic.

Methodological challenges of biosocial interdisciplinary research

Navigating methods in interdisciplinary work

Epistemic heterogeneity manifests through methodological differences. Often, biosocial ECRs found themselves negotiating different methodological approaches. There is no established biosocial methodology for working with birth cohorts and approaches depend on the data available within the particular birth cohort, the research questions, and the team members. When starting out, knowing the most applicable approach can be challenging, particularly when

receiving single-discipline guidance. For example, when bringing together genetics and social epidemiology within an interdisciplinary team, differences in the conceptualisation of key covariates – as either a social or genetic influence – can result in an ECR being stuck between two competing disciplinary approaches when making decisions. But methodological challenges are not without reward, since they can lead to unexpected encounters between datasets and fields of knowledge. For example, a workshop participant assisted an engineering PhD student in analyses of ethnographic data and water quality data from a mixed methods birth cohort project about household water management. At first, the PhD student and their advisors in engineering were unable to imagine how qualitative data from a small sample of households could contribute to his dissertation. This challenge led to an innovative methodological experiment – the student used qualitative field notes and interviews to create variables about residents’ descriptions of their water quality. A senior biostatistician with qualitative experience helped the PhD student integrate these qualitatively derived variables into quantitative models. The results found that residents’ descriptions of their water quality were associated with measured water quality, demonstrating that residents have intimate and accurate knowledge of their water supplies (Martínez Paz, 2023). Appropriate methodological support, combined with support for methodological creativity and experimentation, is crucial for ECRs testing the boundaries of interdisciplinary work.

Data and methodological freedom

Longitudinal birth cohorts are expensive, slow-moving research projects that are accountable to many stakeholders. This makes it difficult for ECRs to influence the research teams or to make changes to data collection within the timeline of a PhD. In addition, the often quantitatively grounded nature of birth cohort studies means they can be closed to collaboration with qualitative approaches. In particular, primary qualitative data collection with participants is often seen as ‘off-limits’ (although not impossible (Carpentieri *et al.*, 2023; Roberts and Sanz, 2018)).

Working with birth cohort studies often involves secondary data analysis. Birth cohort data may be collected from an epistemological position which does not resonate with that of the biosocial researcher. For example, funders may require the inclusion of molecular biology such as genetics and biochemical measures over a broader understanding of the biological (Braun, 2007). These methodological choices affect the selection of data available for secondary analysis and in turn pose limits to the scope of a biosocial analytical framework. However, the variety and richness of data can often offset these limitations by allowing alternative investigations to emerge.

Workshop participants identified several avenues for methodological support during biosocial research with birth cohort data, the first being the role of a well-chosen supervisory team in which there is a shared biosocial paradigm and familiarity with birth cohort research. One workshop participant commented positively on the experience of being embedded as an ECR in a mixed methods interdisciplinary project coordinated by senior academics, which allowed her to build skills and contribute to the birth cohort design without having to navigate disciplinary challenges first hand.

Building a career as a biosocial researcher

Biosocial training in single-discipline teams

The strength of biosocial ECRs working with birth cohorts will largely derive from appropriate training and opportunities. While more biosocial and interdisciplinary training programmes are emerging, many doctoral programmes still train students in the methods and theoretical orientations of a single discipline. In-depth training within a discipline may improve a students’ ability to contribute a particular theoretical/methodological approach to biosocial research. However, doctoral training in a single-discipline department may make it more likely for

researchers and students to find themselves embedded in single-discipline teams and advising relationships – limiting the opportunity for epistemological reflections so essential to the biosocial. For example, a trainee in epidemiology might primarily attend courses to develop their statistical skills rather than other methods, consequently asking solely quantitative questions of their data. Additionally, it may be difficult for a prospective biosocial student or ECR to assess the flexibility of a potential department or supervisor who they have not worked with before, and there are socioeconomic constraints which may impact the degree of flexibility which an individual has when choosing to accept a position or opportunity. To develop an interdisciplinary approach to biosocial research, students may need to look further afield for coursework, mentors, and research projects that will develop their biosocial skills. Thus, looking for doctoral programmes that permit supervisory members from other departments and disciplines is important for a graduate students' ability to develop as biosocial researchers. Workshop participants commented on the advantages of finding supervisors and/or mentors who understand biosocial research and how the training requirements of biosocial ECRs may differ from single-discipline research. Where possible, this may prove most effective by embedding ECRs within existing biosocial teams who work with birth cohorts allowing ease of consultation on issues and facilitating the progression of projects at a faster pace, particularly for PhD students with limited timelines. Seeking out research assistantships on biosocial teams could also provide training and could be encouraged by supervisors who have existing connections. Further opportunities for learning from existing biosocial research may result from integrating ECRs into advisory groups and committees of established birth cohort studies with a biosocial slant (Kent *et al.*, 2022).

Networks and peers

The authors have found immense support in peer-to-peer and student-faculty research networks interested in biosocial research. Seeking out existing networks or creating student reading groups with peers interested in biosocial research can be an effective way to navigate the practical, theoretical, and emotional challenges of biosocial ECRs and complement formal training.

Involvement in networks which focus on biosocial research, such as the BBCR, can also provide a valuable space to discuss issues and learn from others at different stages in their research careers. Networks may also help ECRs to connect with peers outside of their department or institution which can be beneficial in sharing opportunities and collaboration – this is particularly relevant to single-discipline ECRs.

Funding and dissemination

When approaching and disseminating biosocial projects in person or in writing, ECRs must translate and present work in a way which can be understood by an audience unfamiliar with aspects of the approach – be that theoretical or methodological. For example, if writing for a single-discipline audience, they will have to make a case for their specific methods, explain the epistemology, develop a convincing argument of why their solution is adequate for answering the question, and pre-empt any criticism. Multiple workshop participants had experiences of reviewers or examiners who were critical of attempts to triangulate findings with mixed methods, viewing the quantitative analysis as shallow or ignoring the qualitative. Conversely, an interdisciplinary audience may be more prepared to accept the epistemological stance but still require an introduction to methods that might be unfamiliar, and justification for the choice in methods for data integration. Frequently, this requires additional time, thought, and word count to present multiple methods at an accessible level. For example, when presenting work which combines genetic and social epidemiology, genetic concepts and findings are less widely understood even in biosocial settings and thus require careful introduction. Likewise, organising multiple research threads, absorbing complex theory and methods, and making space for the

Table 1. Summary of key challenges and strategies from the BBCR ECR workshop

Theoretical challenges		Resources
Lack of a unified theoretical framework	The biosocial as a paradigm rather than a discipline lacks a unified theoretical framework resulting in a heterogeneous and at times contradicting set of epistemologies and definitions. This requires time, effort, skills, resources, and support.	Epistemological reflections may be stimulating to ECRs and the theoretical flexibility allows a certain freedom. Workshop participants advise familiarisation with existing biosocial literature to position oneself within the biosocial landscape and communicate their theoretical stance with others. Shared reading lists within interdisciplinary teams can help develop theoretical common ground.
Competing epistemologies	The interdisciplinary nature of biosocial birth cohort research implies the encounter of epistemologies from different disciplines which may produce differences in opinion within teams. Epistemic conflicts can be difficult for an ECR to navigate, due to a lack of experience in steering senior academics to a common understanding.	Clarity of biosocial intentions from the start of a collaboration can be crucial in ironing out differences and establishing a method to overcome conflicts that may arise. Where possible, choosing to work with teams that have an established track record of biosocial collaboration can also be a useful learning experience for ECRs.
Methodological challenges		
Navigating methods in interdisciplinary work	Since there is no established biosocial methodology, it can be challenging for ECRs to identify the most applicable methodological approach which satisfies team members from different disciplines – extending the epistemic challenges.	Methodological freedom can be rewarding within an academic environment that is open to it. Adequate support from senior academics and others experienced in mixed methodologies is essential.
Data and methodological freedom	The structure of birth cohort studies means that collecting new data ad hoc for a project is limited by resources and time. Secondary data is the product of epistemological and methodological choices made by others, posing limits to the scope of one's analytical framework.	Workshop participants expressed the importance of a supervisory team with a shared biosocial paradigm and familiarity with birth cohort research. Embedding in an existing biosocial birth cohort study team, where possible, may help to provide opportunities to learn and influence the study design.
Biosocial careers		
Biosocial training in single-discipline teams	Single-discipline training can limit the opportunities to experiment with theoretical frameworks and methodology essential to the biosocial.	Various interdisciplinary and biosocial training programmes are on offer; however for the ECR embedded in single-discipline teams, it may be useful to look for coursework, mentors, and research projects to develop their biosocial thinking.
Networks and peers	Being a biosocial ECR within single-discipline teams can be an isolating experience due to a lack of discussion of biosocial themes and a shared biosocial paradigm.	Support can be found in biosocial peer groups and research networks which allow ECRs to discuss issues and learn from others.
Funding and dissemination	Funders and publishers may be unfamiliar with biosocial literature so additional time is required for presentations to be accessible.	One strategy is selecting funders and publishers familiar with biosocial research. Suggesting biosocial researchers as reviewers can provide a short-term solution. Organisations must collaborate to develop reviewing strategies or protocols to facilitate the publication of interdisciplinary and biosocial work.

conversations needed in collaborative work can extend timeframes and budgets in ways that ECRs can ill afford. While it can be a positive and helpful approach for ECRs to be challenged to think about how to communicate their work outside their discipline, it also asks a considerable amount of someone finding their place as a biosocial researcher.

While connecting with existing interdisciplinary collaborations can ease some of these burdens, there are wider changes which can remove the pressure on individual researchers. For example, the inclusion of biosocial researchers in review panels, or a protocol for evaluating biosocial research could be the way forward for journals wishing to publish more biosocial work. Likewise, a growing number of journals, such as this one, are actively encouraging biosocial work, and networking and collaboration within the field helps ECRs find their feet.

Table 1. Summary of key challenges and strategies from the BBCR ECR workshop

Conclusion

Overall, workshop participants felt that conducting biosocial research in birth cohorts as an ECR is challenging – and is a reflection of the variance in resources available and individual circumstances of ECRs in different fields. Participants in the BBCR ECR workshop shared many similar experiences, but the authors are aware these may not reflect those of every biosocial ECR and the particularity of their settings – which encompass both institutional affiliations and personal circumstances. However, this paper recounts common experiences and strategies to overcome difficulties, despite the authors' different backgrounds – which can be of use to other biosocial ECRs if adapted to their own circumstances. Positioning oneself as a biosocial researcher will not be the fastest, most efficient, or most easily productive path into academia. Nonetheless, the authors find value in these challenges. Biosocial research, and biosocial training in particular, is another example of what Adams, Burke, and Whitmarsh have described as 'slow research' (Adams *et al.*, 2014). The temporal, methodological, and theoretical challenges of biosocial research require the researcher to slow down – to think critically about what methods they adopt and what purpose they serve, about who they are accountable to in their research, and about what impact they hope their research will have, for whom. The authors echo those who see the potential for biosocial work to contribute to understandings of the complex biological and social forces that interact to affect health and inequality (Harris and McDade, 2018; Singer *et al.*, 2017). The authors also acknowledge the time, energy, resources, and labour it takes to integrate disciplines, and the challenge of doing so, especially for ECRs facing the pressures of academic environments that increasingly emphasise productivity, efficiency, and speed. These factors need to be addressed by those developing biosocial training programmes, funders, and publishers if biosocial research is too advanced. While a valuable asset, the diversity of disciplines, methodologies, and epistemologies under the umbrella of biosocial research can make pathfinding difficult for ECRs. Biosocial networks, peer support, and mentoring from senior academics with experience in biosocial research can provide support along the way. The authors hope that biosocial ECRs may find this text helpful in coordinating the resources they have available and making a case for the support, time, and resources they need. The authors call on the enthusiasm for mixed methods, biosocial research to be met with funding opportunities, departmental policies, journal and grant reviewer panels, and networks that support the flexibility, resources, mentorship, and time required to support ECRs in biosocial training.

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