

**The Timing and Partnership Context of Becoming a Parent:
Cohort and Gender Commonalities and Differences in Childhood Antecedents**

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In this paper we use the rich information available from two British birth cohort studies, the National Child Development Study (NCDS) of children born in 1958 and the British Cohort Study of children born in 1970 (BCS70). These studies have followed members of the cohorts from birth through into adulthood and have enough in common, including similar timing of waves during the life course and considerable overlap in content, to enable quite rigorous comparisons of their experiences.

Our particular concern is to examine the childhood antecedents of both the timing of entry into parenthood and the partnership context within which this transition occurs. The timing of first births changed quite substantially between the 1958 and 1970 cohorts, being much more delayed for the later cohort. The propensity to have children both in cohabitational unions and outside any cohabitational partnership increased over time. Men have their first births later than women in both cohorts. These features of changing patterns of entry into parenthood are shared with the US and most other developed countries, although 'solo' parenthood (outside any

cohabitational partnership) appears to have increased only in the Anglo-Saxon countries (Kiernan 200?).

The inter-cohort shifts in timing and context of becoming a parent and the gender differences in timing might seem to suggest that search for common childhood antecedents would prove fruitless. However, in this paper, we explore the extent to which a common model for childhood antecedents of parenthood, both across cohorts and across genders, suffices to capture whatever pattern there is. We explore this through careful creation of common childhood measures for the two cohorts and then pooling the two data sets and fitting common models. We then go on to ask whether explicit terms for gender or for cohort are supported by the data. These can take the form of an unexplained gender or cohort differential or can involve specific pathways through the measured childhood antecedents. Preliminary results show that a great deal of the gender and inter-cohort differences are captured by a common model, but that plausible and interpretable gender and cohort terms are also necessary.

The 1958 cohort has information collected at birth and ages 7, 11, and 16 during childhood, whilst the BCS70 collected information at birth and ages 5, 10, and 16. Thus, most of our measures are available for the three childhood waves. In order to explore the extent to which repeated exposure to disadvantage or repeated behavioural problems matter, we have generally summarised the experience across all three childhood waves. This also has the advantage of minimising the impact of missing information (for more detail see Hobcraft 1998 and Sigle-Rushton 2003).

A major advantage of using these rich birth cohort studies is that we can include several measures taken during childhood that could not be recovered in a study beginning in adolescence. In particular, we can obtain measures of educational test scores and of three childhood behaviour measures (aggression, anxiety, and hyperactivity) at three childhood waves. Moreover, we have indicators of childhood poverty, parental and grand-paternal social class, parental housing tenure, family structure, parental interest in schooling and the cohort member's absences from school. We also know the age of the cohort members' parents at their birth and have retrospective additional information on the age of the cohort member at the time of any parental separation.

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