

## Successful aging: Perspectives on Lives, Times, and Aging\*

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“Historical transformations carry meanings not only for individual ways of life, but for the very character – the limits and possibilities of the human being.”

C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 1959

The study of lives from childhood or early adulthood to the later years has become a vigorous enterprise across the social sciences and the humanities, particularly since the 1960s, but the historical roots of this work extend back at least to the turn of the century (Elder, 1985; Sorensen, et al., 1986). The most distinctive feature of the new work is its consciousness of the interplay between lives and times. To understand pathways of aging, one must consider social change across the life span (Riley, et al., 1988). People age in different ways in response to an ever-changing world.

This observation on the interdependence of lives and times may seem obvious, but most studies of life patterns today are still carried out with minimal attention to the changing world of the aging individual. This bias is even more characteristic of the well-known longitudinal data archives on elderly Americans. They were initially constructed over the 1930s and 1940s with little attention to the dramatic historical changes that were altering human lives in the United States.

Twenty-five years ago I became acquainted with this ahistorical bias through exposure at the University of California-Berkeley and its Institute of Human Development to three longitudinal studies: the Berkeley Growth Study, the Berkeley Guidance Study (birth years, 1928–1929), and the Oakland Growth Study, birth years, 1920–1921 (Eichorn et al., 1981). Though initially confined to development in the pre-adult years, all three samples from the middle and working class have been followed up to later life and the 1980s, a period of dramatic social change. These Americans grew up in the Great Depression, experienced the mobilization of World War II, and followed careers to later life in a postwar era of unparalleled affluence. Such change was not perceived as relevant to developmental or aging issues. Nevertheless, the investigators did collect some information on the larger social changes which later provided this author and others with opportunities for empirical study.

Contrary to expectations at the time, we found that a great many “children of the Great Depression” in the Oakland sample succeeded in rising above their childhood disadvantages and in achieving a fulfilling life to the seventh decade (Elder, 1974; Elder, 1979; Elder, 1987). They followed a timely trajectory in that they were too old to be wholly dependent on their deprived families in the thirties, and they left high school as economic opportunities were improving. Younger cohorts were at greater risk of impaired development and opportunity.

Many unanswered questions concerning this change of fortune led us to initiate another study of Cali-

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fornians, both middle and working class, who were born just prior to the Great Depression in the city of Berkeley (Elder and Rockwell, 1979). These Guidance Study members were only three years old when the economy collapsed and unemployment rose to over 30 percent, an age that would maximize their exposure to the pressures, conflicts, and instabilities of family life in deprived circumstances. The effects of family deprivation were generally consistent with this vulnerability picture, especially for males.

The Berkeley cohort was more adversely influenced by Depression hardship than the Oakland cohort, but this legacy of impairment and limitation did not survive to the middle years. In their late 50s, these “children of the Great Depression” have accomplished more than one would have imagined possible in the 1930s. This study poses once again the *question* of how so many children of disadvantage became adults who have managed to rise above life’s disadvantage.

The answer involves a central idea in human development and aging, that of using one’s resources and options to accomplish challenging tasks and goals (Bandura, 1986). Making the best of what one has refers to both inner resource and external options, from education to work and social relationships. According to studies of the Great Depression and the Second World War (Elder, 1979; Elder, 1987), the desire to make the best of oneself often comes from being tested in real life situations of change or challenge. Clearly, not all Depression children and their parents made the best of their situation in the thirties, but some clearly did across their lives. A critical distinction is the nature of the experience. “Mastery strengthens faith in one’s ability to cope, in personal efficacy and hopeful outcomes, and leads to the gratifications of productive engagement” (Elder, 1974:246). By contrast, failure may reinforce a hesitation to try demanding activities or to make the effort to overcome disadvantages.

The historical timetable of the Oakland cohort favored their chances in surviving family hardships with a sense of goal direction and self-confidence toward making a better life, especially when compared to younger children, including members of the Berkeley cohort. But this prognosis was most appropriate for the Oakland middle class, which faced less severe income losses and had access to greater resources than the working class. Indeed, some 25 years after the Depression, the daughters and sons of the hard-pressed middle class ranked above all other members of the Oakland cohort on their clinically assessed “ability to surmount difficulties and profit from experience, to postpone immediate gratification for the benefits of long-range accomplishment, and to use talents to their fullest advantage” (Elder, 1974:248). The success of these men and women in making the best of a difficult situation provided adaptive resources for later life.

### Making the Best of a Difficult Situation

In social history and biographies, people who make the best of difficult situations often make the best of their own lives. They do so in part because they are empowered by resources or opportunities. Two cases from the Berkeley Guidance cohort of families and children (hereafter the Berkeley cohort) illustrate this point—the life experience of the mothers, born between 1890 and 1910, and their sons, born in 1928-1929, just in time for a decade of prolonged hard times in the country. The mothers were interviewed for the first time in 1928-1929 and then annually across the 1930s. They were interviewed again in 1943 and then in 1969. Health and psychological measurements were obtained across these waves of data. A total of 79 mothers had measurements up to 1969. Forty-seven of the women were positioned in the middle class as of 1929.

The Great Depression has unique relevance for women’s lives in the later years through the common and profound experience of loss. Decremental events typify both Depression life and social experience

in old age. Family life in the thirties often entailed severe income reductions and prolonged unemployment; the irretrievable loss of a family home and furnishings; the collapse of educational plans for a child; the trauma of financial dependence and shared living quarters; the disability, death or separation of a spouse. Old age has much in common with such events, as in major illnesses, retirement, and death. Hence, we believe that Depression hardship offered a potential form of apprenticeship for women in learning to cope with the inevitable losses of old age.

Eighty-three sons of the Berkeley women provided life-history data across the 1930s and up to 1972. The childhood and adolescent archive includes socioeconomic information from 1928 through World War II, records of school performance, teachers' ratings, periodic interviews with mother, and psychological assessments, including the California Q Sort. Follow-ups in 1960 and 1972 entailed lengthy interviews and a battery of psychological, medical, and mental tests. Educational, occupational, and family histories were constructed from the interview materials.

A large number of the men were impaired by family conditions in the 1930s, and they appeared to have little sense of direction and significance as they approached the adult years in World War II. For the most part, they were headed on the wrong path to a successful adulthood. However, military mobilization during the 1940s pulled them onto a more promising trajectory and enabled a good many to make the best of their lives, equipping them for aging well after retirement (Elder, 1986). We turn now to a brief account of the mothers' lives and then follow with military service as a turning point in the lives of their Depression sons.

*Gaining from hard times.* With a young family and a bright future at the end of the twenties, the Berkeley mothers could not possibly imagine how their lives would change in the coming decade. Within a span of three years, total family income had dropped by a third for these women, and the number of families below \$1,500 more than tripled. The economic collapse established something akin to a "natural experiment" by exposing families to relatively deprived and nondeprived experiences with minimal regard for their particular life history in the middle or working class. Forty percent of all families in the sample were hard pressed with income losses greater than a 34 percent decline from 1929 to 1933. We compared these families to those with more modest losses in the middle and working class. The cost of living dropped about one-fourth by 1933, thereby defining families with losses below 34 percent as relatively nondeprived.

Heavy income losses were more widespread and prolonged among working-class families, when compared to the middle class, and women in the working class were less equipped on measures of emotional health and resilience to cope effectively with hardship than were women of higher status (assessments made in 1930). Nevertheless, heavy losses exposed women to challenges and opportunities that most had never encountered before, such as a large increase in household responsibilities and gainful employment. We assumed that such change, coupled with psychological resources, would minimize the risk of emotional health impairment over the life course for middle-class women, and that the risk would be much greater among deprived women from the working class.

Even with initial emotional health considered (as of 1930-1931), the middle-class women who struggled through hard times have turned out to be more self-assured and cheerful people in old age than women from the nondeprived middle class (Elder, 1982; Elder and Liker, 1982; Elder et al., 1984; Caspi and Elder, 1986). They also appeared to be less fretful or worried, less bothered by the limitations and demands of living. Hard times seem to have left them more resourceful than before and less vulnerable to the inevitable problems and setbacks of life. Neither socioeconomic resources nor emotional health

during the early years of adulthood tell us as much as Depression hardship about the vitality and self-confidence of these women in the later years. They claim less in the way of material goods than women from the nondeprived middle class but show greater appreciation for what they have. Gratitude and satisfaction are more common to their outlook than bitterness and regret.

Neither hard times in the thirties nor economic misfortune and loss of spouse during the later years managed to turn women from the deprived middle class toward a dysphoric outlook or a sense of helplessness. Even serious health problems became just another problem to some. As a Berkeley woman observed, "I get in a little difficulty. I've had eight surgeries trying to correct it, but now I've just given up. I do the best I can and most of the time I get along very well." Another woman from this Depression group reflected on the frustrations and humiliation of her long bout with an unemployed husband in the 1930s (1973 interview). "We had two young children, the youngest but a few months old [when he lost his job]. Soon all our savings were gone. I remember the day when the last can was gone from the shelf and the last bit of flour had been used the night before to make biscuits with bacon for shortening." When asked how all of this affected her life, the women replied: "It humbled me considerably. In fact, it was a contributing fact to an inferiority complex which I have had to work hard to overcome." Mastery experiences and problem-solving skills in her own work career up to age 75 may be why this woman largely succeeded in repairing the psychic damage of her Depression trauma.

Among women from working-class families in the Depression, we find no evidence of developmental benefits from coping with economic hardship, only a psychological toll of modest but consistent proportions up to the 1970s. Compared to the nondeprived, the economically deprived are markedly lower on self-confidence and cheerfulness in old age (1969-1970). They are also less assertive and scored higher on feelings of victimization and helplessness at the time, regardless of economic well-being.

The modest size of this enduring effect to the later years leaves open for investigation the important question of how some women manage to rise above the extraordinary limitations of their world. The evidence at hand (Elder, 1974) suggests that neither a privileged life nor one of unrelenting deprivation assures the inner resource for successful aging. Other qualities of the person must enter the picture. These include self-confidence, resilience, and persistence, which come from prior life experience.

*Military Service as a Recasting Event.* Mothers in Depression families played an active role in their own recovery, and a good many from middle-class households gained emotional strength from their coping and adaptations. By contrast, their young sons were wholly dependent on family well-being and consequently show the adverse effects of drastic economic loss and family stress into their adolescent years. With a history of problem behavior across childhood, the adolescent sons of deprived parents ranked lower than the nondeprived on personal adequacy, goal direction, assertiveness, and social competence, a difference that is most striking in the middle class

Twenty-five years later, a mid-life follow-up produced data that showed surprisingly little difference between these children of misfortune and of privilege from the Depression era. The two groups are remarkably similar on psychological well-being and occupational standing. This discovery posed a new question that has taken a number of years to address: How did so many children of the Great Depression do so well in their adult pursuits, given the deprivational circumstances of their childhoods in the 1930s? The question turned our attention to a period of life when the young make choices that have lifetime consequences, the late adolescent and young adult years.

This is time when choices can make the best of one's life chances and redirect the life course from disadvantage to greater opportunity. Choices can also enhance social disadvantages and close off options

such as higher education, that might improve life circumstances. We focused initially on three potential recasting experiences: entry into higher education, marriage to a supportive spouse, and military service. Our attention focused on mobilization into the service because it opened up educational opportunities through the GI Bill and influenced mating options. Three out of four of the Berkeley men entered the service at one point or another, a transition that came unusually early for the young men who grew up in severely deprived families in the thirties. Four out of five entered the service at the earliest possible time, right out of high school.

By pulling tens of thousands of young men from diverse and highly insular communities and placing them on large training bases, service mobilization in the 1940s and 1950s established conditions that favored dramatic life changes, breaking the hold of family hardship, frustration, and limited opportunity that stemmed from the Great Depression. Entry into the service meant separation from family influences and a measure of social independence, coupled with the establishment of new social relationships. Induction severed the recruit from his past experience.

The service also provided a clear-cut break from the conventional expectations of an age-graded career, a time-out or moratorium from "adult" expectations and responsibilities that had much to offer young men who lacked self-confidence and goals. Last, mobilization generally entails a broadened range of perspectives and social knowledge. In the words of a World War II veteran, the experience "sort of opens up your horizons..... You start thinking in broader terms than you did before."

Did the service experiences of the Berkeley men markedly reduce the persistence of their initial disadvantages from a Depression childhood (Elder, 1986; Elder and Hareven, forthcoming)? To answer this question, we compared three groups (no service, early entrants after high school, and later entrants) on educational and occupational status and on measures of psychological functioning in adolescence and at age 40. Since the early entrants include most of the men who grew up in deprived families, we compared them to the nonveterans. Both groups are identical on family social class in 1929. Despite the much greater childhood hardship of the early entrants, when compared to the nonveterans, the former achieved more higher education and a higher occupational status by midlife. They also experienced greater developmental gains on self-adequacy, goal orientation, social competence, and assertiveness from adolescence to midlife; a personal change that nearly closed "the competence gap" that was present in adolescence.

Overall, the data suggest that military service enhanced the life-course development of men from hard pressed families in the 1930s by enabling them *to use personal resources* to advance and enrich their lives through education, work, and family. Motivation is clearly part of this dynamic, along with other personal qualities that veterans frequently cite as benefits of their service experience (Elder, 1987). Especially prominent among these qualities are self-discipline, the ability to cope with adversity, and skill in managing people. Such personal qualities, it seems, were most likely to be put to a test by children of the Great Depression, who had to use all they had to be successful in life. In large measure, the service experience encouraged this development.

Supporting evidence for this conclusion comes from a comparison of the occupational accomplishments of men from nondeprived and deprived families. We find that military service has a significant effect only among men with deprived backgrounds, whereas IQ is generally predictive in both groups. As might be expected, the service effect occurs primarily through higher education, a pathway no doubt enhanced by the educational benefits of the GI Bill. These results suggest that some children of the Great Depression broke the cycle of disadvantage by entering the service and, if they were not mobilized, by vir-

tue of their own intellectual ability.

Shortly after the 30th birthday of the Berkeley men, the project director, Jean Macfarlane (1963:338) acknowledged the extent to which their accomplishments had surprised the staff. A good many of the men turned out to be “more stable and effective adults than any of us” had expected. A large proportion of the “most outstandingly mature adults in our entire group...are recruited from those who were confronted with very difficult situations and whose characteristic responses during childhood and adolescence seemed to us to compound these problems” (p. 341). These reflections are not scientific observations by any means, but they are remarkably attuned to our empirical results. A large number of the most outstanding adults among the Guidance men were children of hard pressed families who subsequently turned their lives around through military service.

This account, of course, applies only to men who survived their term of service, but, fortunately, war casualties in the group were relatively light. Wartime experiences entail a risk of death and health impairment for survivors, as well as the developmental benefits of skills, inner resources, and perspectives that enable veterans to achieve a successful and fulfilling life.

### Historical Experience in Aging Well

The retirement years seem far removed from the experiences of childhood, adolescence, and the young adult years, and yet they remain central to our understanding of the nature of aging in later life. Aging *well* features many qualities, including the process of making the best of life and of one's resources. Drawing from a quarter century of life studies based on long-term longitudinal samples, this essay suggests that people who make the best out of life are frequently those who have managed to surmount the disadvantage of life and times. They have managed to extend themselves by challenging and overcoming obstacles. A life of smooth sailing fails to present such tests (Sanford, 1986), whereas severe hardship tends to damage initiative by ruling out options for self-improvement.

Efforts to make the best out of life come from experiences that reinforce initiative and personal efficacy, and I have described two sets of experiences along this line: 1) the Depression experience of women who were born around the turn of the century and 2) military turning points in the lives of the women's sons who grew up in the 1930s. By and large, economic adversity enhanced emotional resilience and health among elderly women from the middle class and led to negative health outcomes among older women from the working class. Hardship is commonly thought to be linked to a sense of being victimized by life, but this in fact only appears among women who faced the most severe hardships with minimal resources.

Hard times in the thirties generally impaired the psychological well-being of young boys who were born and reared in the city of Berkeley, California, but mobilization into military service largely nullified a negative legacy of Depression hardship in their lives. In most cases, military service generally equipped men of deprived childhoods (1930s) with the motivation and ability to make the best of their life options. Men from deprived homes were more likely than the nondeprived to use their education and resources to good effect. Even as they approached their 60th birthday, they were likely to view their service experience as a turning point and lifetime resource. Most considered their time in the service as highly influential in shaping the life they had led. During moments of sadness and despair, they found the courage to persevere in memories of the military hardships they had survived. The trauma of past combat still troubled some, yet even this pain was balanced by the disciplines and enduring social ties that had sustained them over the years.

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