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Becoming Intergenerational in Birth Cohorts: kinship and the remaking of participation

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This article is part of the series: Excavating and (re)creating the biosocial: Birth cohorts as ethnographic object (<http://somatosphere.net/series/birth-cohorts-ethnographic-object/>)

In recent years birth cohorts have become an invaluable context, resource, tool and ‘technology’ of an emerging terrain of biosocial science, given the unique opportunity they provide to study how the life course is intergenerationally shaped. As many contributors for this series have highlighted, the *what* and *how* of biological and social transmission between kin are of central concern in cohort studies (Roberts 2019), even if this is sometimes often intensely focused on ‘mother-child’ dyads and early developmental stages of the life course (Lappe and Hein 2020), or singular kinds of social exposure, such as early adversity (Lloyd 2020, Kim 2020). Drawing on pilot study research with a small group of cohort participants from a UK based regional birth cohort, we reflect further on what Janelle Lamoreaux has called ‘cohort kinship’ (2019) by examining what it means to become intergenerational in birth cohorts. In doing so, we illuminate how both the ‘doing and being’ (McKinnon 2016) of kinship is temporally entangled with the (re)making of cohort participation. Here we extend recent social science work examining the relevance of relatedness and kinship to the meaning and experience of cohort participation and kinds of biosocial research carried out in birth cohort studies (Cruz et al *forthcoming* Kalender and Holmberg 2019). We see this as part of a wider effort to resituate kinship in studies of scientific practice (Carsten 2019) and re-invigorate what Gibbon and Lamoreaux (*forthcoming*) have termed ‘Intergenerational Ethnography’ in examining the making and unmaking of kin within and beyond the biosocial sciences.

The Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) is a long standing regional based birth cohort that was established in the early 1990s in the south west of England centred on the city of Bristol.^[1] ([#_ftn1](#)) Pregnant women residing in Avon were invited to take part in the study enrolling at minimum initially 14,541 women and 13,988 children. This study now has a distinctive ‘intergenerational focus’, having recruited 3 generations of parents and children (Boyd et al 2013, Frazer et al 2013 and Lawlor et al 2019).^[2] ([#_ftn2](#)) The pilot study research that informs our discussion was undertaken with members of the ALSPAC cohort by both co-authors between November 2019 and May 2020. We recruited four pairs of adult participants, parents of

the first wave of recruitment and their adult children, who now have their own young children involved in the cohort. The explicit aim of the pilot work was to examine the experience of and the reasons for 'family' participation in cohorts.^[3] (#_fn3). Joint interviews with pairs of participants (mothers and daughters) were undertaken in one of the participants' homes or on online video platform such as Skype/Zoom, audio recorded and then subsequently transcribed. The pilot study work forms the foundation for a four year Wellcome Trust funded international comparative project led by Sahra Gibbon, comparatively examining the 'Biosocial Lives of Birth Cohorts'.

Drawing on interviews undertaken with paired participants we first examine how the temporal scope of their cohort participation, which for most extends across a more than 30 year period, shapes their understanding of biosocial research as inherently intergenerational, encompassing diverse lives and experiences. We then examine how, for related cohort members, participation is normalised and naturalised as a practice of maintaining intergenerational kin-making that is nonetheless materialised in specific ways. Here we pay particular attention to the way that filling in of yearly 'research books' and the collection (or in one case, non-collection) of placentas were highlighted by those we interviewed, illuminating how the 'substance' of kinship and cohort participation is made to matter. Finally we consider the dynamic and shifting scope and involvement of mothers and their adult children in the birth cohort across the span of interconnected lives, showing how the often intense focus on pregnancy and early childhood in cohort studies remakes the meaning of participation and relatedness for different generations.

'Changes and comparisons: An intergenerational understanding of the biosocial'

For the participants we met, intergenerational time is used as a way of understanding the scientific aims of birth cohort research. As other contributors to this series have pointed out, longitudinal birth cohorts provide an ideal context for investigating the ways external environments interact with human biology on a molecular, hormonal, and genomic level, to bring about disease pathology. For cohort participants, the interrelationship between social conditions and human health as a form of biosocial research is understood and framed through family lineage and the lives of past generations. In responding to questions about why different kinds of biological and social research were undertaken by the cohort study, participants described this as a means to track and compare change. During interviews, participants noted 'as time goes on, things do change . . . the way of life changes.' Differences in types of leisure activities, diet and nutrition, and the use of technology, were noted between participants lives and those of their children (and grandchildren). Participants discussed the potential impact of lifestyle changes on health and wellbeing, and how these could be measured across an intergenerational timespan to potentially create productive comparisons for scientific research. Penny, an original mother and now grandmother, who was interviewed alongside her adult daughter Elizabeth, reflected:

Penny: So much has changed since we started in the 90s . . . it's a different world really isn't it . . . everything's just moved on so much. So- for them [the birth cohort] to get the information over the generations it's- it's gonna be good . . . I mean for you [meaning Elizabeth], you growing up . . . you were very active . . . they used to be always out playing games and swimming and things . . . kids tend to just be in the house nowadays . . . so it would be quite interesting to see – how the next generation are in their fitness levels, and their- their mental wellbeing and things like that

This excerpt demonstrates how understandings of the biosocial are enacted for participants through intergenerational kin relations, as environmental change and its effect on human health is tracked through their own personal family histories. Multigenerational involvement was viewed by participants as key to documenting this change, as they repeatedly conceptualised the biosocial in the context of intergenerational temporality.

Furthermore, participation in the study seemed to enable interlocutors to reflect on the changing social patterns and family dynamics within their own intergenerational lives. Maeve, mother to now adult daughter Lucy, reflected during their interview that she was pleased to have seemingly, as she saw it, 'broken the cycle' of her difficult childhood which began when her mother died. In listening to Lucy discuss her positive experiences of being a participant in the cohort study, Maeve equated these pleasant memories to Lucy's relatively happy childhood.

Maeve: my mum died when I was a child so my upbringing, you know it wasn't awful, but it wasn't particularly very happy . . . when I had Lucy I definitely had the sense of I wanted . . . some safety, some continuity . . . good education, all those things that people want [laughs] for their children . . . so it was quite interesting for me because I think that I may have broken the cycles . . . and it's lovely listening to Lucy [today] . . . and then to see Naomi because a lot of things that Lucy does with Naomi . . . you know I did with her – certainly at weekends and school holidays and that when I wasn't working, and it's quite nice?

Maeve particularly liked hearing Lucy talk about how much her participation in the birth cohort shaped her happy childhood: 'I really enjoyed it – it was a big part of how I grew up really? . . . half the fond memories I have of being a child are being at "Children of the 90s"'.^[4] ([#_ftn4](#)) Maeve also noted how this positive influence was now finding its way down the generations into her granddaughter Naomi's life, and she said she felt proud to see these outcomes she had helped to create. In this way, kin-making and research involvement become entangled for participants, as personal and familial experiences, memories, and insights become synonymous with both cohort participation and kin-making. The birth cohort not only provides a fertile arena in which the intimate relations of family lives are embedded, develop and interweave but cohort participation also becomes a resource to makes sense of the specifically intergenerational aspects of lives and relationships.

Naturalising and Materialising kinship and participation

The capacity for naturalisation in the way that idioms and practices of kinship are used has long been noted in anthropology (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995). This 'domaining' capacity was present in our interviews as those we

met reflected on how cross generational participation in the cohort was, as one participant put it ‘normal and natural’. This was particularly evident in the way that adult children who had been part of the first wave of recruitment and involved in the study as a result of their mothers’ pregnancy, and then subsequently through the course of their infancy, childhood and adult lives, reflected on their involvement. As Lauren said, ‘it’s always been something that I’ve *done*...it’s just something I do- it feels second nature’. A sense that participation was something that was not only natural but also an active way of sustaining connection and continuity between generations was also common among those we met. This was powerfully reflected in decisions by adult daughters to involve their children in the next wave of the study, as they had also been enrolled by their mothers. Reflecting on the continuity between her lifelong involvement in the cohort and her decision to recruit her daughter Naomi, Lucy put it like this:

‘I guess I always just went and it was just what we did and then I really enjoyed it and I found it interesting, and felt like I was helping to contribute to something and so . . . when they asked about CoCo 90’s[5] (#_ftn5) I wanted Naomi to be part of it in some way really . . . just cause I really enjoyed it- it was a big part of how I grew up really . . . I thought it would be really cool for her to be part of that . . . I just thought it would be a really nice thing for us’

It was also striking how cohort participation as a way of maintaining intergenerational relatedness was also materialised in tools and technologies that encompassed the routines of cohort participation. Many of the mothers and daughters we met reflected on the ‘research books’ or ‘questionnaires’ that they had been sent routinely every six months to 12 months to fill in information about their lives, exploring, as one participant put it ‘how – we’ve coped, how our lifestyles changed’. Discussing the booklets with the mothers and daughters in our interviews evoked memories of how the books had punctuated the shifting temporal dynamics of parenthood and childhood, and also how different booklets had focused on the intergenerational aspects of their lives. This is how Alice, one of the original cohort participants put it:

Alice: I had *three* of you [children] in the study, I used to have *three* sets [of questionnaires], at the same time as trying to look after you all. And *that* got a bit too much . . . [now] I don’t have to answer them about *you* anymore. I just answer them about *me*

Similarly, original mother Sue remembered using the booklets to document intergenerational details of not only her life, but also her daughters, and her husbands:

Sue: it’d be a booklet, one booklet’d be – it’s about that sort of size it is [uses magazine to compare size] and there’d be one booklet for me to fill in – about how things are going for me and how I’m coping with her [Jackie] . . . and then it’d be another booklet there, all to do with Jackie – you know, is she doing this? And how is she coping with this? . . . But then it would be one book then to do with the dad how he’s coping like with Jackie

Alice and Lauren, her now adult daughter, discussed together how the content of the questionnaires and booklets changed over time, in order to record the physical and emotional changes going on:

Lauren: it's mainly things like *how*– how much is this like you? How frequently do you feel like *this*? Or do you *do* this? . . . during teenage years there'd obviously be a lot about– like – personal changes like physically, mentally, emotionally. But then –

Alice: you had drawings of bodies, and say – ask you where you had hair didn't they?

Lauren: [smiling] yeah you had to like – tick the box

Recent anthropological engagement examining the substance of kinship point to how a range of material artifacts, from food to identity documents, can not only embody but actively materialise kinship and relatedness across time and space (Carsten 2019, Sahlins 2013). The routine booklets and questionnaires are in this sense an artifact in the making of intergenerational cohort kinship. Yet there was also a more obviously embodied artifact of intergenerational kinship a stake in the materialities of cohort participation.

It was notable that a number of the original cohort adults talked about the collection and/or donation of their placenta when asked about how they had become involved in the cohort study. Asked to recount how she had become involved in the study in the 1990s, Sue pointed out how she had been told 'they take the afterbirth and sort of do experiments from that', adding laughingly 'I said "that's fine" I don't particularly want it'. While Maeve, like Sue, saw this in terms of 'all those other tests that you do when you're pregnant', this was somehow different for Elizabeth, an adult daughter who already had two of her children involved in the study and who had in addition donated her children's cord blood to the study. For her, this seemed more linked to an investment in the future of biosocial research saying 'if that can help in some way for- birth, or little babies- then I think you know go for it'. It was however the experience of *not* being able to donate a placenta to the cohort study for one of the participants we met, because of the restrictions around collection of biological data due to COVID-19, which perhaps most powerfully revealed the centrality of donation of the placenta to intergenerational participation. Lauren, who was 9 months pregnant when we met, recounted how it was at this stage that involvement in the study was quite demanding, pointing out 'they want quite a lot of samples from you'. But she also recounted how she had been told by the study co-ordinators a few days before the interview 'we don't want your placenta', because of current COVID-19 restrictions. She reflected on this with a mixture of humour but also consternation and disappointment at not being able to donate her placenta to the cohort study, as her mother had and as she had with her own previous children:

'I'm actually a bit, like gutted- cause I'm like [laughing] 'well er- if they don't take it then, they're never gonna be able to have it! . . . you've got one chance to take my placenta and then that's it. So I'm hoping that they er change their mind, but we'll see'.

As Martine Lappe and Robin Hein Jeffries (2020) point out in their discussion, in birth cohort research the human placenta provides a temporal connection to past and future whilst also being a crucial infrastructural resource for biosocial science. While limited to a small number of cohort participants, our findings suggest that the donation of placentas (and other biological materials of pregnancy, such as cord blood) to birth cohort research must also be further examined in terms of the meaning and substance of intergenerational cohort participation.

Remaking cohort participation and relatedness in 'life-course' research

While for many of those we interviewed there was a clear alignment between the experience of intergenerational time and biosocial research that naturalised cross-generational participation, it was also evident that the meaning of cohort participation 'within the family' was dynamic. This was particularly the case for those who had been recruited as pregnant mothers at the start of the study but who were now witnessing an intense focus in the cohort study research on their daughters' pregnancy and early life of their grandchildren. For the original mothers, now grandmothers to CoCo90s participants, the changing face of their participation contained both positive and negative aspects which reflected their shifting roles in the family unit.

Grandmothers felt a strong sense of pride; 'I'm very *proud* that Lauren's in it', 'it's . . . quite touching really to think that like she's carried it on . . . [to] a certain degree what I've started'. They thought it particularly 'amazing' that their grandchildren might continue with the cohort study, as Maeve said 'to think that Naomi as well, will go through all these things . . . it's quite nice isn't it cause it feels like a shared experience.' Intergenerational participation in the cohort study enabled Maeve to imagine herself linked to her granddaughter's experience, fortifying a sense of connection and relatedness between them despite differences in their lives. In this way, multigenerational cohort participation appeared to support the processes of kin-making, providing participants with a novel terrain through which to further solidify kinship bonds. Grandmothers' felt sense of pride at establishing a legacy of participation further reflected their changing role within the family system, as they recognised themselves passing down not only personal traits and behaviours to their children and grandchildren, but also the potential for membership in the cohort.

Yet at the same time many participating grandmothers commented on their decreasing role in the research, which was, for some, coupled with a wider sense of lessening impact in the lives of their adult children. In terms of research participation, Maeve reflected that her participation had 'got less over the years, which you would expect', whilst Penny said 'I'd like to go *more* often. . . I haven't been called for *years*, now.' She reasoned this lessening in participation was down to the fact 'probably in my life not a lot's gonna change sort of year to year now – whereas obviously when you're *younger* . . . so much is changing all the time so that's why you get called [every year].' Penny's comments reflect the intense focus in birth cohort research and biosocial science on pregnancy and early years and now also pre-conception (Lappe and Hein 2020). But they also reflect a sense of redundancy she felt as a participant – that her data was no longer as valuable as that of her grandchild. Alice explicitly linked this feeling of redundancy to her changing role from primary caregiver to a grandmother / mother of an adult daughter:

Alice: I'm probably less motivated . . . which I know sounds – a bit weird? But I suppose I feel like I don't have as much to contribute as I did when I was . . . the primary parent if you see what I mean – because I would do it [the research] . . . – for the children, and I would be doing them [the questionnaires] for myself . . . I was probably the main influence on the children? Not just my – personality, but in terms of what they would be eating, what they would be doing after school, and so on. . . whereas now I feel that my influence [is not] on – like, anything really! [laughs]

Similarly, Alice's adult daughter Lauren had noticed a difference to her participation from a child and teenager to a now mother:

Lauren: so they're still doing things like recall tests for me . . . and they'll take all the physical measurements, and they take skin folds and that sort of thing, but its . . . maybe less so about me, and more so about [pauses] – my child [laughs] . . . it is about me a bit, but it's – more so about him, and I'm kind of like a by-product . . . which is fine

These comments suggest that both a sense of 'pride' and 'redundancy' concerning cohort participation are not only mirrored in the grandmothers lived-experiences of aging and changing social roles but that 'becoming intergenerational' through family participation in longitudinal birth cohorts reflects a degree of ambivalence and indeterminacy. These might be seen as expressions of what Cruz and colleagues in their examination of the relevance of kinship to cohort studies describe as 'relational residues' (*forthcoming*). In a context where birth cohort initiatives increasingly seek to extend the temporal scope of their study population by recruiting women preconceptionally or by including subsequent generations of original birth cohort members as study participants, we suggest the dynamics of intergenerational cohort participation require further attention. This is especially in light of the ever-present challenge of maintaining participation in cohort studies across the life course and given that longitudinal cohort participation can be so easily unmade. At the same time the temporal shifts in the meaning and perceived significance of participation, articulated by those whose experiences we recount here, are a reflection of the intense 'critical window' that emerging fields of biosocial research, including in birth cohort studies, have on particular moments of the life course, such as pregnancy and infancy. Long standing intergenerational birth cohort studies might in this sense be a vital resource in moving beyond an intense focus on pregnancy and early childhood in biosocial research as well as vertical biological and social transmission from parents to children, to consider the biosocial dynamics that shape health outcomes across a wider temporal terrain that considers the multidirectional intersections of connected lives.

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Notes

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[2](#_ftnref2) The study website contains details of all the data that is available through a fully searchable data dictionary and variable search tool <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/alspac/researchers/our> (<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/alspac/researchers/our>)– (<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/alspac/researchers/our-data/>)data/ (<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/alspac/researchers/our-data/>) (<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/alspac/researchers/our-data/>).

[3](#_ftnref3) Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the ALSPAC Ethics and Law Committee and the Local Research Ethics Committees with informed consent for use of data collection via interviews obtained from participants following recommendations of the ALSPAC Ethics and Law Committee at the time.

[4](#_ftnref4) This is the colloquial name for ALSPAC study.

[5](#_ftnref5) ‘Children of the Children of the 90’s’ (COCO) or also known as ALSPAC-Generation 2 began in 2012 and have now themselves been involved in many waves of data collection.

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