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## **Introduction: Gender and Generations: Women and Life-cycles**

Katie Barclay, Rosalind Carr, Rose Elliot & Annmarie Hughes

The 17th Annual Conference of the Women's History Network (UK) was hosted by the Centre for Gender History, University of Glasgow on the 5-7<sup>th</sup> September 2008. The Centre for Gender History was formed in 2008 and developed from the recognition that the School of History at Glasgow University has the largest concentration of gender historians in Britain with research interests spanning from the medieval period to the present day.<sup>1</sup> The theme of the conference, *Gender and Generations: Women and Life-Cycles* was designed to attract papers from a wide chronological, thematic and geographical perspective to stimulate discussions on continuity and change across chronological and physical boundaries. This proved very successful with sixty-eight papers covering the period from the twelfth to the twentieth centuries. The conference was attended by 113 delegates, with 39 of these coming from overseas. Through the lens of gender, generations and the life-cycle, the papers looked at experiences in Britain, Europe, Canada and the United States reflecting the international character of the participants. A selection of these papers are presented here, chosen to represent the main themes of the conference.

Unlike many areas in the discipline, the history of the life-cycle in Western Europe has always been considered as gendered. When the seventeenth-century divine Richard Allestree wrote his advice-book, *The Ladies Calling*, he opened with a general section on behaviour appropriate to all women, and then divided the rest of the book into three

sections: virgin, wife and widow.<sup>2</sup> The close association between women and biology, particularly their role as mothers, and the fact that, for a considerable part of history, women were defined by their relationship to men, meant that the tripartite life-cycle of virgin, wife, widow was both the expected, or perhaps ideal, destiny of most women and the lens through which their lives were interpreted. In contrast, Allestree's companion text, *The Gentleman's Calling*, began with a chapter titled 'Of Business and Callings in General', followed by a chapter on the 'Varieties of Callings', highlighting, similarly to Shakespeare's seven stages of man, that the male life-course was understood to be more varied and driven by a relationship with the economy and society.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite this, men have not been ignored in studies of the life-cycle, while the economic and social drivers of women's lives have also come under scrutiny.

The history of the life-cycle is closely related to that of the history of the family and the new social histories of the 1970s. Historians became engaged with the everyday experience of living and how it impacted on wider social change and the major events of traditional political histories. A study of the life-cycle sees the process of aging as going through distinct stages, which hold different meanings in different historical contexts, and which impact on how individuals understand themselves and relate to the wider world. In most societies (or in sub-groups within societies), there is a normal life-cycle that people conform to and against which people's experience can be judged. Movement between stages can be smooth and painless or disruptive and traumatic, depending on the status and connotations associated with particular cycles, and how and when the individual progresses through the stages. Transition through the life-cycle, and disruption from it,

can also impact more broadly on the family, and on society and economy. It is complemented by the concept of the life-course, which arose due to the limitations of understanding life as operating in stages. It emphasises that life is a process and that there can be considerable overlap and messiness as people progress through the life-cycle stages. For example, in certain social groups married women do not work outside the home, but it may be the case that a woman did not give up paid employment on the day she married, but several months before in preparation, or months later, perhaps in expectation of the birth of a first child. The life-cycle is seen to enforce an unacceptably high degree of inflexible uniformity on social groups and can even force particular 'cycles' onto social groups where it is not relevant. Furthermore, it is argued that whereas the life-cycle tends to be ahistorical (with cycles being applicable to a broad variety of social groups and closely associated with the biological steps of aging), the life-course method is more sensitive to social, economic, demographic influences and the impact of historical events. In practice, many historians now combine both models when exploring how people move from birth to death.<sup>4</sup>

Many historians have focused on the process of aging, with lively debates on topics such as the invention of childhood, the creation of youth or teenage years, the point at which people became adults, or reached old-age, and at what points in life people held the greatest authority. Each stage in the life-course involved different behaviours, treatment and significance at particular historical points and places. Yet, it is interesting to note that in an exploration that understands life as a process, certain aspects of life, notably youth and old-age, have been given much more consideration than others, such as

childhood or marriage, which tend to be discussed as static events.<sup>5</sup> The significance of age as a specific number that people hold as a significant aspect of identity is a relatively novel concept, aided by birth registers and certificates, where we no longer expect people to round up to an even number or to the nearest decade. Age has become an important marker in the life-cycle with adulthood and the various rights associated with aging now tied, legally and socially, to a number, rather than to marriage, inheritance or property ownership as in many past societies. In some contexts, this shift brought unexpected benefits for women. The transformation of the basis of the right to vote from property ownership to having achieved a particular biological age made women's exclusion from suffrage appear significantly more arbitrary than in the past, giving them a platform to fight for legal rights.<sup>6</sup>

Aging itself is not uniform across social groups. Changing life-expectancies meant that that old-age could range from forty in the middle-ages to eighty in the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, age meant different things for different social groups, even within a shared society. Today in Glasgow, life-expectancy for men in working-class Calton is 54, compared to 81 in prosperous Bearsden.<sup>8</sup> In the nineteenth century, when the Irish judge Mr Justice O'Brien sentenced the farm labourer, fifty-five year old Jack Dunne for his part in the murder of Bridget Cleary, he gave him a light sentence of only three years imprisonment, compared to the five years given to his younger conspirators. He noted that the longer sentence 'would consume the greater portion of the life that nature has allotted to you'. He also gave fifty-nine year old Mary Kennedy a free pardon in the same case as she was an 'old woman' and 'nature had decreed a sentence

upon her not far distant'. Yet, Justice O'Brien was over ten years older than Jack and six years older than Mary.<sup>9</sup> Class affected not just life-expectancy in terms of an abstract age at death, but the physical body, making people look worn or tired, disabling the body, and impacting on ability to work. Similarly, working-class girls in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain and the US found it significantly more difficult to prosecute men for statutory rape than middle-class girls, as their social class was assumed to make them sexually precocious.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, aging was not just a biological, but a social process.

The life-cycle of individuals has not only been discussed in terms of age, but in terms of significant events. Age at leaving school and going to work, leaving home, getting married, having a first and last child, and widowhood have all been seen as important points in the life-cycle with distinctly gendered repercussions.<sup>11</sup> A significant amount of work has been done on age at marriage and its impact on fertility. This is tied into a centuries-long discussion on the reasons for the population explosion of the nineteenth century, and its implications for social change and the creation of modern society.<sup>12</sup> The age of marriage for women has been understood as central to understanding fertility patterns in societies where contraception was rarely practiced. Yet, while age at marriage for men has frequently been calculated, its social significance has not been related to fertility, but to inheritance patterns, based on evidence that inheritance affected age at marriage for both men and women.<sup>13</sup> Late age at marriage has repeatedly been linked to a uniquely Western European desire to be financially independent and able to start a separate household on marriage. Yet, this picture is considerably more complex.

Many early discussions of the life-cycle came in response to the demographic histories produced by Hajnal and by Laslett and the Cambridge school. Revisionist scholars argue that the 'snapshot' picture of the household produced through demographic histories disguised that they evolved and changed over time.<sup>14</sup> Studies indicated that many households became extended when children married and continued in the parental home with elderly parents. They became multi-generational as (grand) children were born, then nuclear as the older generation died. Some families remained extended as unmarried siblings stayed at home throughout their lives, or at particular times, such as when children were young and adult labour was need on the farm or extra income was desirable.<sup>15</sup> This picture was complicated by region, occupational group, local customs, and period, with, for example, twentieth-century British families being more likely to set up new homes on marriage, rather than live with parents.<sup>16</sup> The life-cycle of the family was affected by economic need and opportunity, and social values.

Employment is often discussed in terms of its role over the life-cycle. The apprentice, journeyman, master cycle was a significant part of work experience for many social groups, while domestic service was an important stage in the life-cycle of many women and men in North-Western Europe until recently.<sup>17</sup> The employment of domestic servants also tied in with family life-cycles: servants in farming communities were often employed by families while they had young children, with the expectation that children would replace servants as they aged.<sup>18</sup> Other social groups experienced changes in occupations over the life-cycle, so that in Norwegian fishing communities, men fished when they were young and living with parents, fished part-time and farmed part-time

after marriage, and moved to permanently into farming as their children aged.<sup>19</sup> Wages were often predicated on the life-cycle with younger workers earning less, while in certain occupations, such as the twentieth-century civil service, men received a wage increase on marriage, while in turn women found themselves barred from employment.<sup>20</sup> Even today the three-stage minimum wage in the UK, and levels of income support benefits, are based on an assumption that most people do not have dependents or leave the parental home until they are older than 21.

The relationship between income and life-cycle has led to an interest in how household incomes altered over time, with evidence that many households began marriage financially strong, experienced a period of poverty when children were young and not bringing in an income, and mothers income restricted due to childcare, followed by a time of increased wealth as children started earning and leaving home. Finally, some families had a decreasing income in old-age due to limited opportunities for work.<sup>21</sup> This also affected the life-cycle of work for women as many stopped working in paid employment or changed to different occupations when children were born or started earning.<sup>22</sup> This picture is complicated by class: better socio-economic circumstances meant that not all women worked outside the home, while inheritance could relieve financial burdens if arriving at a convenient time. Conversely, at the bottom of the social spectrum, there were households that never experienced periods of economic success, and where generational poverty and reliance on charity began in childhood and continued until death.<sup>23</sup>

The timing of events has been of considerable interest in the discussion of life-cycle, and interestingly, it is here that the disjuncture between modern and past societies has become most evident. While age at marriage or entry to the workforce has fluctuated over time and with social context, modern society appears significantly more homogenous than in the past (although there is still some variation across social groups).<sup>24</sup> Over the course of the twentieth century, people increasingly experienced events at a similar age to others of their generation. In the 1970s, not only would 95% of women in Britain marry, 80% of them would marry between the ages of 17 and 25, a distribution of only seven years. In contrast, in 1851, the age of marriage was much more widely distributed with a range of 20 years for the central 80% of women in a demographic spread.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the age when people stopped working in the past varied widely depending on wealth and health, with retirement a luxury of the rich, while ill-health and the nature of manual labour could cause the poor to stop working earlier than those of a higher social group. In contrast, a standardised, and sometimes legislated, age at retirement in modern societies means that most people stop working around the same age. Yet, it is also the case that women who have been housewives often don't experience retirement, although their lives can alter when their husband retires.

Past societies, at least in Western Europe, seem to have moved through the life-cycle in a broader variety of ways than in current society, which raises interesting questions for 'disorder' of the life-cycle. Most people move through the stages of the life-cycle in the same order as others in their society, but occasionally people experience mis-timing or disorder.<sup>26</sup> Mis-timing may involve marrying at 16 in a society where the

average age of marriage is 28, and this is considered exceptionally young; while disorder is experiencing life-cycle events in the wrong order, such as having an illegitimate child in a society where children are expected to follow marriage.<sup>27</sup> The social impact of disorder can throw off the timing of later life-cycle events, as well as effecting long-term life chances, perhaps causing poverty, social ostracism, migration, or conversely bringing unexpected benefits.<sup>28</sup> There is evidence however that larger historical events could repair mistiming or disorder in early life. For example, the depression of the 1930s resulted in large numbers of young men not completing education and training or not moving into employment at the expected time, but the social impact of world war two was such that by the end of the war, they had been placed on a similar social and economic footing to their previously more successful counterparts.<sup>29</sup> How people experienced disorder particularly in societies with significant variation in the life-course, with perhaps the exception of a broad scholarship on illegitimacy, still needs greater exploration, although there is an increasing body of work on individuals who never followed the expected life-course, such as never-married women and nuns (although less on how their lives developed over time).<sup>30</sup>

A complementary and closely-related concept to the life-cycle is that of generations. One of the key findings of a study of the life-cycle is that, belying the simple stage model, every generation moves through life differently to their parents. While family and social background can offer strong predictors of behaviour, the relationship between the individual and their unique historical context ensures that life-cycles are far from unchanging.<sup>31</sup> Evidence suggests that the point in the life-cycle that generations

experience particular macro-events, such as economic downturn or war, shapes their outlook and future behaviour. The concept of generation becomes key when explaining why people within the same society hold different values or behave in different ways. Indeed, evidence suggests that generation is a better predictor of political belief than age across the life-course, indicating that ‘conservatism’ or ‘radicalism’ are not themselves life-stages, but life-long behaviours.<sup>32</sup> In turn, this can lead to social conflict between generations, who see the world differently despite significant homogeneity of background. Yet, interestingly, most historical studies of generational conflict tend to be focused on the twentieth century, perhaps reflecting the greater financial freedom that allowed each generation to mark their difference through consumption.<sup>33</sup> There is less work on how generational relationships operated in societies where youth is not such a distinct concept, where several generations shared single households, or where the concept of individualism is less significant.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the importance of generation to social trends, there is also a substantial body of work forming on how and why people of the same age experience life differently, and even pointing to order of birth as a key determinant in how individuals will move through the life-course.<sup>35</sup> The role of the individual in determining the course of his or her life and how they negotiate wider social, cultural and economic contexts is becoming of increasing interest, as historians move away from a history of economic determinants to an exploration of choice. This has resulted in a change in methodology with a move away from histories focused on large-scale demographic surveys to a greater interest in qualitative data, notably towards oral histories and the letters and diaries

compiled over the life-course.<sup>36</sup> The question of agency and subjectivity- the negotiation between the self and context- is of increasing concern, reflecting a broader move within social history, and is a central concern across this special edition.

The articles in this volume indicate the various interpretations of the themes of generations and life-cycles by historians of gender, as demonstrated by the variety of papers given at the conference itself. Reflecting recent trends in women's history - emphasising women's agency and moving away from the imposition of rigid structural patterns - the articles in this volume demonstrate the means by which patterns evident in the past (and to an extent also imposed by the historian), such as life-cycles, are shaped not only by factors such as period and class, but also by women's agency and negotiation of power. This negotiation of power is central to Barclay's study of the life-cycles of the marriages of the eighteenth-century Scottish elite. Disrupting the historical model of the elite life-cycle being one of youth, marriage, old age and/or widowhood, Barclay uses a study of changing expressions of intimacy to demonstrate that marriages themselves had life-cycles, indicating that other related life-cycle changes such as aging informed negotiations of patriarchal power.

Central to the differing trajectories of women's lives is individual experience, and this can disrupt a stages-based life-cycle pattern as imposed by historians. This is emphasised in Simonton's article where she brings together quantitative and qualitative data regarding servants in eighteenth-century Europe in order to demonstrate that, like marriage in Barclay's article, service was not a single distinct stage in the life-cycle.

Rather than always being a phase between childhood and marriage, the status and identity of the servant was one that could continue through various other stages of the life-cycle. For example, many women remained in service after marriage and there were many elderly women in service. These differences in life-cycle experiences of service mean, Simonton argues, that we need to accept both a broader definition of service and a lack of a common pattern in assessing the place of service within the life-cycle of non-elite, eighteenth-century women.

Experience, and in some cases women's enactment of agency, disrupts life-cycle patterns and informs women's construction of their own life narratives. In Royle's examination of the composition of the life of Christina of Markyate, she demonstrates how this medieval female saint was able to influence the narrative construction of her life. Taking events which could be interpreted as disempowering, Christina reinterpreted and represented them as central to her development towards and performance of sainthood. In discussing Christina's agency, Royle emphasises the difficulty in separating her voice from the 'textual creation' of the writer of her vita. This is less of a problem in histories of twentieth-century women, where historians are able to conduct oral history interviews, thus gaining access to women's interpretations and representations of their life histories. However, oral histories are not a straightforward information retrieval process, and the narrative created is influenced by a number of factors, not least the intersubjectivity between interviewer and interviewee, something examined in Pattinson's article.

The construction of life narratives is a central aspect of the generations theme of this volume; a theme which highlights the differences in women's experiences shaped by the historical context through which they have lived. Pattinson's article, examining oral history interviews with Second World War veterans, teases out the differences and similarities between male and female interviews, showing the importance of generational experience to female veterans' achievement of composure in their self-representation. This, Pattinson argues, adds a layer of complexity to the role of gender in creating the intersubjective relationship within the oral history interview. The perceived and real generational differences in understandings of womanhood between interviewer and interviewee meant that there was a difference between them that was not overcome by a commonality as women. Gender was a central, but not necessarily the key, issue in the way intersubjectivity operated.

The importance of women's self-definition, and the way this is affected by women's sense of, or lack of, agency in the context of their material experiences, is explored in the article by Osterud. Examining the construction and expression of life narratives in oral autobiographies of rural American women from the Nanticoke Valley, America, born before 1920, Osterud emphasises the centrality of women's relationship to the land on their sense of agency. Osterud demonstrates that the experience of inheriting or buying land gave women a different sense of ownership towards it than women who married inheriting sons. This, in turn, shaped their understanding and expression of agency in their life narratives.

The examination of narratives of women's lives is continued in Jones' examination of letters sent to the British Abortion Law Reform Association during the 1960s. Treating these letters as texts mediated by wider discursive debates on abortion, Jones illustrates the similarities between those sent by women from differing socio-economic positions and experiences, a similarity demonstrated by the deployment of a language of desperation. Recognising the problems in using letters to access women's voices, Jones nonetheless makes a strong case for their use in examining women's attitudes to abortion and their negotiation of a changing legal and medical terrain. This negotiation was informed by the generational change in women's life experiences caused by the social and economic changes in society that occurred during the 1960s, such as increased female access to higher education and access to the contraceptive pill.

This theme of generations and generational change is central to Zweiniger-Bargielowska's article on conceptions of female beauty and fitness and the rise of the modern female body in inter-war Britain. Discussing changing attitudes and debates regarding female fitness within a broader discourse of companionate marriage and women's sexual autonomy, Zweiniger-Bargielowska argues that women of the interwar generation adopted, and were active in forming, a particular idea of beauty linked to a female duty of patriotic motherhood. Fit and healthy women helped to maintain the 'Racial Health' of the nation. Whilst the image of the healthy and sexually liberated 1930s woman can appear as middle-class and youthful, Zweiniger-Bargielowska shows that working-class women and older women were also involved in the physical fitness movement through, among other things, participating in keep-fit classes.

A different picture of female old age is presented in Streubel's article, 'Strange Old Worlds', which explores the marginalisation of the elderly in post-war West Germany. Here, age acted to strip people of their agency and their identity as individuals. In the immediate post-war years, the elderly were portrayed as powerless, culpable both for their association with the Nazi past and their inability to participate in economic and social renewal. Drawing on supposedly impartial documentary journalism, Streubel shows how this lack of agency worked to dull gender differences, although she also makes the case that, in some ways, age and gender intersected to increase discrimination against women. As the social and political upheaval sparked by the 1968 generation changed the cultural landscape, Streubel charts the development of a new type of old age, termed 'young at heart', where the elderly generation recreated the accepted social norms for their stage in the life-cycle in order to fit with the democratic, consumer society of which they were a part. Streubel shows how this creation of a 'new elderly' was also gendered, shaped by the feminist politics of the 1970s which gave women a more emancipated role, but also by constructions of masculinity which emphasised physical fitness and worthwhile citizenship for men. Despite this recreation of a specific stage in the life-cycle to fit with changing social norms, what comes out most poignantly across the period under discussion is the dehumanising of the elderly population, the lack of perceived individuality and the comparative loss of social markers such as gender and social class. Gender adds but a layer of social discrimination to a group who – because of their stage in the life-cycle – were struggling to define their social position.

Together, the articles in this special edition highlight the diversity of work, chronologically and geographically, being written on Gender and Generations: Women and Life-cycles. They show how these themes relate to general trends within the discipline of social and family history that increasingly looks towards individuals and choice within the processes of history. We would like to thank all those who participated in the conference for contributing their stimulating papers that facilitated discussion across time and places. We would especially like to thank our authors who turned around such exciting articles in a short space of time, and finally we wish to thank those who took time to read and comment on the articles that appear in this special edition.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Centre for Gender History see our website

[attp://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/historicalstudies/researchcentres/centreforgenderhistory](http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/historicalstudies/researchcentres/centreforgenderhistory)

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