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# 1

## Setting the Scene

This book focuses on family life across four generations and explores in depth twelve families. It examines how members of the three adult generations engage as over the life course of parents, grandparents and great-grandparents (over the life course). It thereby covers a vast panorama of social change that has occurred over the 20th century. Most of the surviving great-grandparents in our study families were born in the second decade of the 20th century, overshadowed by the First World War, and had witnessed much of the 20th century. The grandparents mostly were born in the 1940s, another decade dominated by war, and had lived through the second half of the century; while the current parent generation were born, on average, around 1970 on the cusp of enormous economic, social and political changes, which have dominated the last quarter of the century.

The book is the story of these generations both as historical cohorts and as family generations. It is therefore also the story of intergenerational relations: the processes of transmission between family members of different generations and the negotiations and reciprocities these imply. It focuses on two important facets of people's lives: the care they give and receive from family members and their employment practices over the life course phases of parenthood. Our story has a number of central and competing themes: continuity and change over generations, both for individuals and families; the transmission of parenthood identities and other resources from one generation to another; and the structural influences that shape relations between generations. We shall return to our families later in this chapter, introducing them and placing their lives in their historical contexts, but first we turn to some broader considerations.

## Multi-generation families

Over the 1980s and 90s households have received rather more consideration than relations between households linked by kinship. And in the beginning of this millennium the dynamics of family lives are coming to the fore with a renewed interest in the concept generation. Particular attention has been drawn to the multi-generation family, sometimes termed the 'beanpole family' – long and thin in form. While more family generations are alive simultaneously with greater life expectancy, the size of each successive generation shrinks as the number of children born declines and partnerships are no longer lifelong. In Britain, one-third of those aged 80 and above are members of four-generation families, as are one-fifth of those aged 20 to 29 and 50 to 59, and a quarter of those in their 30s (Grundy *et al.*, 1999). Viewed from another perspective, by the age of 50, three-fifths of the British population still has a living parent and just over a third are grandparents (*ibid.*).

While change in the structure and shape of families can be defined and documented, the implications of this and other parallel changes for family dynamics – the relationships between different generations and between family members – are less clear. One reading suggests *vertical* relationships within families have become more important especially in recent years in Britain, due both to increased possibilities and to greater necessity. Thus, with many people now enjoying longer, more prosperous and healthier old age, multi-generation families may constitute an enhanced source of support, for example through older generations passing on assets and other support to younger generations. At the same time, with increased longevity, the need for support for frail elderly family members may be increasing, placing greater demands upon intergenerational family ties. Intergenerational support may also become more important in a situation where other sources of support may be declining: those transmitted via a diminishing welfare state, bringing increased societal expectation that the individual assume responsibility for managing risk; and weakened support from nuclear families who are increasingly affected by separation and divorce.

Against the case for the increasing importance of intergenerational family ties, there is the counter argument. Intergenerational support is likely to be curtailed because of major changes in the world of work, not least more women working when they have young children and working full time, which have not been matched by changes in the provision of formal 'childcare' services. Moreover, some social theorists argue that, as the long arm of tradition has lifted, so the onus is on

individuals to construct their own lives (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996) and to create 'families of choice' (Giddens, 1991). In short the growth of individualism and the detraditionalisation of society are said to fracture family ties and turn us into atomised individuals. Thus if people choose which persons to support and exchange resources with, there is the risk that some family members will be left out. Similarly, if some groups decide not to have, or are unable to have, children, there is likely to be a polarisation between those with intergenerational ties and those without such ties.

The processes of change are likely to be uneven, complex and ambivalent. For instance, it may be that the availability of some resources for transfer between generations increases, while in other cases it reduces or, at least, proves unable to keep up with rising demand. To take one example, due to growing employment among women in their 50s and the fact that they are increasingly working long hours, the pool of grandmothers available to provide childcare for their grandchildren may be less than hitherto, especially in respect of full-time care. Indeed, as the new generation of young people defer parenthood, women will enter grandmotherhood at older ages, with implications for grandmothers' willingness to take on the care of grandchildren. As studies are currently showing, grandmothers would prefer to give part-time or occasional care to grandchildren (Dench and Ogg, 2002). A study of people aged 50 to 65 found 17 per cent providing childcare for at least one grandchild although few did more than 20 hours per week (Mooney and Statham, 2002). The availability of the 'pivot generation' to provide care for older generations may also be affected. On the other hand, increased income available to women may enable them to help other generations in financial and material ways.

So the narrative we will be telling is by no means clear from the outset. Some degree of change can be guaranteed. But while broad trends may be described, they will not be uniform, and in many cases there will be strong continuities. Making generalisations is likely to be more risky than usual.

## Studying change and time

In focusing on changes in work and care across generations, this book must address issues of *time* – time passing and time as it is perceived and experienced. In interpreting the lives and accounts of families and their members we have had to engage also with time both in terms of life course time and historical time, a topic to which we return in Chapter 8.

Much of the family lives which we have elicited and studied lie in the past, some in the dim, distant past. It is, for example, very different for a great-grandmother, possibly in her 80s, to speak about her experience of early motherhood compared, say, to a mother currently caring for a young child. The former is in a different life course stage, her memory may be less clear and she is interpreting memories of one historical time from the vantage point of another historical time and through the lens of intervening time: the experience of an event at the time, and 50 years later how you think you experienced that event may well not coincide.

These different types of time frame the research and writing of this book. So too do our own histories. Some of the stories told to us resonate with our own earlier research careers in which, 20 years ago, we studied work and care among new parents (Brannen and Moss, 1991). We cannot avoid thinking of today's parents in relation to this earlier work, which was undertaken at a time when it was very unusual for women to resume full-time employment after childbirth. Some stories reflect our personal life course trajectories: growing up in post-war Britain; becoming parents in the 1970s; returning to education post-childrearing and building research careers during motherhood in the 1970s. Two of us became grandparents and members of four-generation families in the 1990s; then returned to being a three-generation family again. As interpreters of other people's stories, we cannot stand outside our own life course and historical time.

Writing this book has forced us to engage with the past and what has now become 'history', both in personal terms as we have just indicated, and also professionally. While two of the four of us who worked on the study have backgrounds as historians, we are mindful that social science is governed by present concerns and assumptions and has grown up with its 'face set towards the present and its back on the past' (Fielding, 2004) especially through the influence of Modernity and its preoccupation with Progress. For example, the social survey, currently a powerful method in social science, is used as a litmus test of change, in its identification of patterns and regularities as the basis for predicting trends (Krausz and Miller, 1974). Moreover, too often we plunder the past to serve our current purposes (Hammersley, 2004).

### **The case for studying twelve families**

The reader may ask: what can we learn from studying the past in only twelve four-generation families? Why look at the particular? What, if anything, can we say about the general from the particular? How can

such a few cases validate or refute the generalised trends proposed by historians and sociologists? We would answer these questions thus.

We recognise that ours is but one approach to the study of multi-generation families, and that there is a trade-off to be made between depth and breadth: between understanding and developing theory in particular conditions and on the basis of specific cases and making inferences to the wider population. Our argument is that for our purposes – understanding a complex social phenomenon, a strategy based upon ‘thick description’ of a small number of case studies (Geertz, 1973), is preferable to the ‘thin description’ which is generated by studying a large number of cases, even if selected on statistical grounds. A qualitative sample of multi-generation families, such as ours, where it is selected to produce contrasting cases, provides a strong foundation on which both to generate and to examine theoretical questions. Thus, by selecting the particular and understanding the particular conditions of the ‘case’ (the families and their members), we may build in-depth analyses of work–family lives. Furthermore, in comparing the cases, we may identify patterns of change and continuity and create typologies of family relations and cultures which we can situate in specific times and spaces. We would add that, as Wengraf (2001) suggests, in understanding such complex social phenomena as multi-generation families, the raw materials which the researcher brings are crucial.

In short, in our view an analysis of twelve families is a powerful research strategy when combined with a strategic choice of cases, an historical contextualisation of the material – and the particular biographical method we have chosen, to which we now turn.

## **A biographical approach to family change**

Family and social change is a product of individuals’ habits, actions and conscious decisions carried out in particular contexts and life course phases. As Paul Thompson (1977) wrote in his study *The Edwardians*, it is imperative to look closely at the actions and meanings of individuals that underpin the grander picture, which historians and sociologists create from statistical sources and the documentation of ‘facts’. This is not to suggest that people’s recollections of the past represent the past as it was lived and experienced at the time. Indeed, in employing a biographical approach which we have done here, we have sought to give emphasis to three issues: the shaping and scheduling of life course time; the location of individuals and families in historical time; and subjective experience and interpretation (Wengraf, 2001).

How then did we approach these several aims, in particular the conceptual and analytical distinction between what Wengraf (2001) refers to as 'the lived life' and 'the told story'? The contextualisation of stories in relation to the life course was an organising framework for the interviews both because a life course frame shaped our approach to interviewing family members and because many of the research participants themselves chose to organise their stories (in the first unstructured part of the interview) around a life course frame. The research participants less commonly referred to external events and circumstances, that is beyond their own lives and those of their families. In producing their accounts of the 'facts' of the lived life, research participants punctuated their narratives about the past with argumentation and evaluation. In justifying past actions, they did so often in relation to the normative climates of the present or current life course phase. Thus we have tried to interpret subjective interpretations of actions and events in relation to life course and historical/contemporary time.

Making the link between biography and historical time proved as demanding. To recreate the historical context, we often had to draw upon our own knowledge of the particular historical periods in question. A study of families covering four generations requires a wealth of knowledge, encompassing as it does the lives of three birth cohorts as well as extending into a variety of fields of research – family life, work and care. (We return to our strategy for eliciting both context and meaning later.)

Connecting biography and the wider context is currently rather unfashionable in biographical research; a structuralist perspective is often seen as incompatible with a biographical approach (Miller, 2000). Some biographical researchers are critical of realist epistemological standpoints and positivist research practice (see, for a discussion, Hammersley, 1989; Giele and Elder, 1998) and have preferred to draw upon the tradition of ethnographic interpretative writing (Denzin, 1997), through an emphasis on the subjective aspects of experience (Plummer, 2001).

Despite such current epistemological tensions between the two research traditions of realism and interpretivism, we believe that there is nevertheless a strong case for combining them in research practice. It is worth remembering that such tensions have been successfully accommodated in the past. Znaniecki, writing in the early part of the 20th century (see Thomas and Znaniecki, 1996) and an original exponent of analytic induction in biographical research, drew his inspiration from the natural sciences. For Mills (1980), the study of the intersection between biography and history was central and an approach we consider well

suiting to providing insights into the complexities of family lives as they unfold in specific historical circumstances.

## Research design and methods

In studying the past, it is necessary and inevitable to be selective. Four-generation families by definition only include those with a long-lived oldest generation; and only those who are in the main healthy are likely to want to participate in research. Moreover, they are less likely to include male members among the oldest generation since men on average die younger than women. Also, over time, it has remained the case that death rates vary enormously between occupational groups. This means that working-class great-grandfathers are likely to be absent in a study such as ours which sought to reflect the social class spectrum.

In designing the study, we considered that a focus upon a small number of case studies, purposively selected, was appropriate, enabling us to examine in detail how employment and care play out over the life course and across the generations. Our aim was to provide a thorough description of the families, to identify patterns and typologies, and to develop and further theoretical interpretation. In the analysis we have undertaken a difficult juggling act: between looking across all the members of each historical cohort, thereby doing justice to all our material and exploring commonalities across generations; exploring intergenerational relations and patterns within particular families; and drawing out the narratives of individual family members.

Twelve case-study kin groups were theoretically chosen where the third (i.e. youngest adult) generation had at least one young child (or, in one case, where a child was shortly expected). The three adult generations are accordingly referred to in the book from the vantage point of the youngest generation as: the parent, grandparent and great-grandparent generations. We did not aim to interview the whole family but to cover the following: one set of grandparents; one child of the grandparents (with at least one child under 10 years) and his or her partner; and both sets of the grandparents' parents (i.e. both the grandfather's and grandmother's parents). We did not interview the youngest generation of children. The maximum number of family members that could be interviewed was eight (i.e. where all four great-grandparents were alive and willing to take part), and the minimum five (i.e. where only one great-grandparent could be interviewed). It is important therefore to stress that while we sought to cover the generations, we also had to put tight parameters around those included within each generation.

In the event, we interviewed 71 family members: 8 in two families, 7 in one, 6 in three and 5 in six (Table 1.1). We saw all 24 parents (one couple were expectant parents, their first child due a few weeks after the interviews); 24 grandparents (of whom one was a step grandfather); and 23 great-grandparents. Of the 25 'missing' great-grandparents, 21 were dead (7 women and 14 men) and 4 refused, including one couple where the husband was very ill and two couples where the husband refused but the wife agreed.

The families were sampled to 'represent' the grandparent generation. We sought to stratify them by occupational status, to include an equal proportion of grandparents employed (currently or in the past) in a professional or managerial occupation, and in lower status occupations. We also sought to ensure that the grandparent generation would be split between those couples where currently both were in employment and those where one or both were retired or not working, in order to create variation in employment and care roles.

A final sampling criterion related to marital status. We decided to rule out further complexity in the analysis by including only those grandparents who were still in the same relationship as when they were bringing up their own children and, similarly, to include only those in the current parent generation who were living with the parent of their children. This study has therefore little to say about the impact of divorce on intergenerational relations.

We screened and recruited families through a variety of strategies: postal questionnaire surveys of current and recent employees of two public-sector employers in London; advertisements in local newspapers; and our own social networks. Discussions took place with 59 families who initially appeared eligible. Some turned out on closer inspection not to meet our criteria; in other cases, one generation refused to take part or could not be interviewed because they lived abroad. We chose families who were all living in England since we had limited time and money available for travel: because our recruitment efforts were focused on London and the Home Counties, most of the people we interviewed (46) were living in these areas, with a further 20 in the south of England and five in the Midlands or the North.

Despite great efforts to make contact with minority ethnic families, we found none that matched our criteria in terms of numbers of generations and geographical location. This is not surprising given the history of migration to Britain. However, the great-grandparents in one of our 12 families were German Jews who had come to Britain in the 1930s as refugees.

Table 1.1 Summary of key characteristics for each family at the time of interview

Family	Who we interviewed	Employment and occupational status when interviewed <sup>a</sup>	Geographical proximity <sup>b</sup>
<i>Ashton</i>	7		
Great-grandparents	Bill and Mildred ↓ Edna		Close
Grandparents	Joseph and Shirley ↓	Joseph a window fitter and Shirley a sales administrator, both full time	
Parents	Luke and Claire	Luke a window estimator and Claire an administrator, both full time	
<i>Brand</i>	8		
Great-grandparents	Jimmy and Mary ↓ Arthur and Gwen		Close
Grandparents	Gordon and Janice ↓	Gordon a self-employed builder, full time, and Janice retired	
Parents	Sean and Janet	Sean a self-employed builder, full time, and Janet a clerk, part time	

Table 1.1 (Continued)

Family	Who we interviewed	Employment and occupational status when interviewed <sup>a</sup>	Geographical proximity <sup>b</sup>
<i>Hillyard</i>	6		Close
Great-grandparents	Nat and Margot ↓		
Grandparents	Thelma and Stan ↓	Thelma a chief secretary and Stan a draughtsman, both full time	
Parents	Sarah and Ben	Sarah a nanny and Ben a labourer, both full time	
<i>Horton</i>	6		Dispersed
Great-grandparents	Maureen ↓		
Grandparents	Grace ↓ Bernard and Diana	Both teachers, full time	
Parents	Patrick and Geraldine	Patrick a TV production manager, full time and Geraldine a TV floor manager, part time	
<i>Hurd</i>	5		Dispersed
Great-grandparents	Doreen ↓		
Grandparents	Celia and Michael ↓	Both retired	
Parents	Graeme and Rachael	Graeme a student and Rachael a teacher, full time	

<i>Kent</i>	5			Close
Great-grandparents		Margaret		
		↓		
Grandparents		Miriam and Robert		Miriam an administrator in family business and Robert a company chair, both part time
Parents		↓		
		Juliet and James		Both senior managers, James full time and Juliet part time
<i>Miller</i>	5			Dispersed
Great-grandparents		Jessie		
		↓		
Grandparents		Kate and John		Kate retired and John a driver, full time
Parents		↓		
		Alison and Thomas		Alison a student, Thomas a senior manager, full time
<i>Masters</i>	5			Dispersed
Great-grandparents		Ida		
		↓		
Grandparents		Carol and George		Carol retired and George a chemical engineer, part time
Parents		↓		
		Douglas and Sonia		Douglas an accountant, full time and Sonia a teacher, part time

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Table 1.1 (Continued)

Family	Who we interviewed	Employment and occupational status when interviewed <sup>a</sup>	Geographical proximity <sup>b</sup>
<i>Prentice</i>	6		
Great-grandparents	Jack and Josephine ↓		
Grandparents	Fiona and Paul ↓	Fiona not working and Paul a postman, full time	Dispersed
Parents	Andrew and Sheila	Andrew a customer relations clerk, full time and Sheila a shop assistant, part time	
<i>Peters</i>	8		
Great-grandparents	Donald and Eileen ↓		
Grandparents	Wilfred and Dora ↓ George and Pricilla	Gordon a technical designer, full time and Pricilla retired	Dispersed
Parents	Annabelle and Mark ↓	Annabelle a baby gym worker, part time and Mark an electrical engineer, full time	

<i>Smith</i>	5		Close
Great-grandparents	Brenda		
Grandparents	↓ Pauline and Peter		Pauline a finance officer and Peter a bus driver, both full time
Parents	↓ Neil and Jane		Neil a scaffolder, full time and Jane not working
<i>Samuels</i>	5		Dispersed
Great-grandparents	Ruth		
Grandparents	↓ Richard and Marjorie		Richard a senior lecturer and Marjorie a senior manager, both full time
Parents	↓ Stephen and Naomi		Stephen managing own business, full time, Naomi a teacher, part time

<sup>a</sup> All great-grandparents were retired.

<sup>b</sup> All interviewees living within 45 minutes travelling distance of one another.

Our completed sample included five families where *both* grandparents were employed full time; five families in which the grandfather still worked full time and the grandmother was not employed; and one family where both grandparents were retired and another where both worked part time. In the case of five couples, both grandparents were in or had held professional or managerial jobs. In the remaining cases, the grandfather was in a lower level non-manual occupation (2), a skilled manual occupation (2) or a low skilled manual job (3).

Table 1.1 summarises information about each of the families: the members we interviewed; the names we have given them; the occupational and employment statuses of the grandparents and parents at the time of the interview; and the geographic proximity of the family members to one another.

There are two important points to make about our sampling strategy. First, self-selection in studies of multi-generational families operates at more than the individual level. Our sample is inevitably biased towards families where contact between members was maintained and relations were reasonably good, though it would be wrong to assume that relations were all close, as we shall see in the following chapters. But a study such as ours will not include families where there is estrangement or little contact.

Second, the role played by the person negotiating consent from other family members on our behalf was crucial and one that is not easy for us to assess. Six of the twelve families were recruited via grandmothers, reflecting perhaps the fact that grandmothers are typically pivotal 'kin keepers' (Firth *et al.*, 1969). Of the remainder, one family was via the grandfather, two families via great-grandparents (one great-grandfather and one great-grandmother) and three via parents, all mothers. We anticipated that our first link person to the family would act as gatekeeper and secure (or not) the agreement of those whom we wished to interview, but in some families responsibility was handed over to another who was blood related. Thus, for example, a great-grandfather who asked his son-in-law to contact his own parents or a grandmother who asked her partner to contact her parents-in-law. It is to be expected that the time taken to negotiate access will vary: in some families the process was relatively quick, while in others it took longer. But access tended to be quicker in families where there was frequent contact and close intergenerational relationships.

## **The interview approach and the analysis**

The method adopted in this study is based on the Biographic-Interpretive Narrative Interviewing and Analysis approach (Wengraf, 2001). The

narrative aspects of interviews, particularly where biographical interviews are concerned, are very important in understanding informants' meaning (Ricoeur, 1980, 1992; Nilsen, 1996; Wengraf, 2001). However, lives are lived in and through time and cannot be divorced from the historical settings in which they occur (see Erben, 1998). Our perspective, therefore, is sensitive to both the 'told story' (biography) and the chronology and historical context of the 'lived life' (life course) (Wengraf, 2001).

Having trained in the particular type of biographical approach as set out in Wengraf (2001), we adapted it for our own study. Our interviews were in three parts. In the first part, interviewees were invited to give an account of their lives, with a minimum of guidance and intervention from the interviewer. The invitation, at the start of the interview, took this form: 'I am interested in the story of your life bearing in mind that the focus of the study is work and care. Take your time. Start where you want. I will not interrupt you.' Encouraged in this way to begin their story where they chose their own words, the interviewee was provided with an opportunity to present his or her own *gestalt*. Some spoke for some considerable time without interruption while others' narratives lasted only minutes. In the second part of the interview, the interviewer invited the respondent to elaborate the initial narrative in relation to salient events or experiences that had figured in it. (These were chosen by the interviewer drawing upon her/his notes and they were covered in the order of their original telling.) Finally, using a more traditional semi-structured style of interview, the interviewer asked additional questions relating to the specific foci of the study. Depending upon interviewees' responses in the first two parts, this could be a lengthy or short part of the interview.

Confidentiality was of particular importance in this study. Before starting interviews, we emphasised that what we were told would be treated in confidence and not repeated to other family members. Having four researchers on the study meant that none of us interviewed more than two members of the same family, thus helping to reinforce confidentiality. Most couples, for example, were interviewed at the same time though separately by a different researcher. All interviews were recorded and transcribed and respondents signed consent forms indicating their copyright wishes in the future use of these recordings and transcripts.

The interviews were conducted between September 1999 and August 2000. They lasted on average three hours. Although shorter and less extensive than the full Biographic-Interpretive Narrative Interviewing approach (two sessions of interviewing were carried out only in a few

cases), we found this three-phase interview method very productive both for eliciting biographical 'facts', and for enabling respondents to reflect through different time lenses. The mix of types of data generated by this approach, while providing challenges to us in reporting on their use in the analysis, constitutes, we believe, a methodological strength of the work.

In the analysis, we followed to some extent the analytic procedure of separating the biographical and historical 'facts' of the interview from the interviewee's subjective experience and interpretation of them (Wengraf, 2001), in particular in our first phase of analytic writing. We also sought to map the historical time lines and life histories of each family member.

The analysis proceeded through three stages, working from the individual level, to the level of the 'whole' family, and culminating in comparisons of the 12 families. In the first stage, immediately following the interview, each researcher wrote up their recollection and impressions of the interview. Next, when the transcript became available, each of us was responsible for writing a full summary of each interview that she or he had conducted. This detailed preliminary analysis (around 10 pages with page references to the transcript) organised the material under a number of pre-specified sections or themes:

- the interview encounter, including the response to the invitation to give a biographical account;
- the 'life history chronology' with dates and information on biographical events and their timings;
- perceptions and experience of childhood and growing up;
- perceptions and experience of education, work and working life; and the intersections between work and care;
- perceptions and experience of settling down, marriage, becoming a mother/father, being a mother/father with particular reference to the period of having a young child;
- reports of help with children and housework;
- reports and perceptions of the use of childcare facilities when parents had young children;
- reports and perceptions on withdrawal from the labour market and the empty nest syndrome;
- perceptions and experience of becoming and being grandparents including the care provided to grandchildren;
- reports of contributions to eldercare and care of other family members including material resources and other support;

- the experience of great-grandparenthood;
- reports of receipt and experience of care by great-grandparents;
- attitudes to own (future) care in old age;
- attitudes to formal support including from the state;
- thinking about and planning for the future;
- responses to vignettes concerning decisions by a mother and father with a young child in relation to work (not to work, to work part time or to work full time) and in relation to choice of childcare (informal and formal) (for text of vignette, see Chapter 3, footnote 1).

Sections were also included in which we set out the main themes which emerged from the interview and a section noting key turning points in the life course.

In the second stage, we sought to make cross-generational comparisons within a particular family. Each of the four team members was responsible for carrying out several analyses at the kin-group level for three of the 12 families (around 20 pages for each analysis). In two analyses we sought to focus upon lineages of men and women within the same family according to a number of themes, for example a separate analysis of motherhood and one of fatherhood over the generations. A third analysis examined care transactions and material support between family generations (and within couples), and covered the justifications interviewees gave for care and employment decisions and for giving or not giving support.

This second analysis stage brought together what Wengraf (2001) refers to as different 'systems of relevancy': the contextual information of historical time, the lived life (the biographical 'facts'), and the told story. This, together with the first stage, provided a sound basis upon which to build the final analysis. At the third stage, we compared the multi-generation families in relation to the analyses generated in stage two. We worked with particular themes such as fatherhood and motherhood and with subgroups such as men and women; this extended writing formed the basis for the chapters.

### **Introducing the families and their historical times**

In further introducing the families, we will first identify some key life course characteristics that define each cohort, summarised in Tables 1.2 (women) and 1.3 (men). Employment histories are described and considered later, in Chapters 3 and 5. We then place each cohort within a very broad historical context.

Table 1.2 Key life course characteristics of women in 12 case families

	Great-grandmothers ( <i>n</i> = 16)	Grandmothers ( <i>n</i> = 12)	Mothers ( <i>n</i> = 12)
<i>Date of birth</i>			
Range	1906–35	1940–55	1962–80
Median	1919	1945/46	1968/69
<i>Siblings</i>			
Range	1–12	1–4	1–4
Median	3	2	2
<i>Left full-time education</i>			
16 or under	13	5	4
17	2	4	2
18 or over	1	3	6
<i>Qualification</i>			
None	14	2	1
Others	1	6	6
Professional/degree	1	4	4 (+1 studying)
<i>Age cohabited with present partner</i>			
	1 couple cohabited	None cohabited	11 cohabited
Range	–	–	17–30
Median	–	–	21
<i>Age at marriage</i>			
	All married	All married	9 married
Range	18–27	19–21	21–27
Median	22/23	20	23
<i>Age at first child</i>			
Range	19–30	18–24	19–31
Median	23	22	25/26
<i>Number of children</i>			
One	0	1	1 pregnant with first child
Two	5	4	10
Three or more	11	7	1
<i>Age of grandparenthood</i>			
Range	38–59	35–54	Not applicable
Median	49/50	49	

### Great-grandparents

The 16 great-grandmothers and 7 great-grandfathers represent at least one maternal or paternal great-grandparent in each of the 12 families. Born mainly between 1911 and 1921, 15 of the 23 great-grandparents were in their 80s at the time of the interview, with a median age of

Table 1.3 Key life course characteristics of men in 12 case families

	Great-grandfathers ( <i>n</i> = 7)	Grandfathers ( <i>n</i> = 12)	Fathers ( <i>n</i> = 12)
<i>Date of birth</i>			
Range	1911–31	1937–53	1962–80
Median	1918	1943	1968/69
<i>Siblings</i>			
Range	1–5	1–5	1–4
Median	2	2/3	2
<i>Left full-time education</i>			
16 or under	6	6	5
17	0	1	0
18 or over	1	5	7
<i>Qualification</i>			
None	4	3	1
Others	3	5	5
Professional/degree	0	4	5 (+1 studying)
<i>Age cohabited with present partner</i>			
	1 couple cohabited	None cohabited	11 cohabited
Range	–	–	17–26
Median	–	–	23
<i>Age at marriage</i>			
	All married	All married	9 married
Range	22–31	17–27	21–29
Median	27	20/21	24
<i>Age at first child</i>			
Range	23–32	19–29	18–31
Median	27	24	26
<i>Age of grandparenthood</i>			
Range	41–60	35–54	Not applicable
Median	50/51	49	

81 years. Many came from large families and most left school at 14 or 15; only two stayed on in full-time education to 18 or beyond. No great-grandfathers and only two great-grandmothers gained any qualifications while at school, though three great-grandfathers subsequently took apprenticeships and other job-related training. Only one couple cohabited before marriage (in unusual wartime circumstances) and all got married. Eight of the great-grandmothers' lives were marked by widowhood (one at the age of 22), two were widowed twice and two went through a divorce. Great-grandparents had their first children rather later than the next generation but earlier, at least in the case of

great-grandmothers than the current parent generation. The median age for becoming a grandparent was 50.

### **Grandparents**

The 12 grandparent couples, most of whom were born between 1940 and 1948, were in all cases but one 'original couples' (a criterion of the selection of the grandparent sample): in this case, both grandparents were remarried and the parent generation was the child of the grandmother's first marriage. Their median age at interview was 53–54. They grew up in slightly smaller families, with a range of 1 to 5 siblings, in contrast to their parents whose siblings ranged from 1 to 12. This is a better qualified generation than their parents. Although most left school at 16 or younger, 8 had stayed in full-time education to 18 or beyond. Two grandmothers had a nursing training and two gained university degrees. Five grandfathers had been through higher education either immediately after schooling or later in life and only three had no qualifications. Marriage was commonplace as in the older generation while none cohabited beforehand. Marriage took place earlier than for their parents (at a median age of 20 for grandmothers and 20–21 for grandfathers, compared to 22–23 and 27 respectively for women and men in the older generation) and they also started families earlier. But, like their parents' generation, the median number of children among grandparents was three. Grandparenthood came at a slightly earlier age than the older generation (49 median).

### **Current parents**

Again, all twelve couples were interviewed and were selected on the basis that they were still living with partners of their children. Most were born between 1965 and 1975; the median age at interview was 31 years for mothers and fathers. This was the only generation in which some participants grew up as only children; thus they have a lower median number of siblings. Their educational achievement again surpassed that of their parents; 13 (six mothers and seven fathers) left school at 18 or older while only one father and one mother had no qualifications. Four men and five women had degrees and two more were studying at university level when interviewed. In contrast to the older generations, all but one couple had cohabited and three were still not married. They started families at an older age than their parents and grandmothers (a median age for mothers and fathers of 25/26). It is likely that some have yet to complete their families (seven had at least one child under 5, with a range from birth to seven years).

## **Historical contexts**

One way of locating the three adult generations historically is to consider how their lives were shaped by major historical events – though, as already noted, research participants less readily tied their own life stories to such external points of reference. Great-grandparents were mostly born during or soon after the First World War, when the British Empire was at its greatest extent, although already seriously weakened by the huge costs of the conflict. The majority of inter-war immigrants came not from the colonies but as refugees from Europe. The welfare state was a minimal presence, old age pensions for example having only been introduced in a rudimentary form in 1909 and with no national health service or financial support for children. State education was only beginning to reach into adolescence: statutory school-leaving age was raised from 12 to 14 in 1921. Most of this generation would have lived their childhoods or youth during the 1930s Depression, with its high levels of unemployment. Marriage and early parenthood, in many cases, coincided with the Second World War.

The next generation, the grandparents, were mostly born during or soon after this War, growing up with rationing and shortages, but also the establishment of the modern welfare State including a national health service, family allowances (cash benefits paid to parents) and widening access to secondary education. The principle of free secondary education for all children was established by the Education Act 1944, with a two-tier system of grammar and secondary modern schools, and statutory school-leaving age was raised to 15 in 1947. Empire faded rapidly, but the late 1950s saw the beginnings of large-scale immigration from former colonies, which was to turn Britain into an ethnically diverse society. This generation's youth and early parenthood coincided with changing cultural and social mores, symbolised by the rise of television, the birth of rock and roll (in 1955), the legalisation of abortion (1967) and the spreading use of contraceptive pills from the late 1960s, and the beginnings of the Women's Movement. Yet it was also a generation that, like the previous generation, still mostly conformed to certain social norms: marriage rates peaked in 1971, cohabitation and divorce were still relatively uncommon. A range of household appliances and other products, such as cars, began to be available and affordable. It was a generation, too, caught in the Cold War, confronted both by the nuclear threat and an alternative political and economic ideology.

The parent generation grew up during the industrial unrest of the 1970s and the radical changes of the Thatcher years. This was a period

of decline in manufacturing industry and rapid growth of the service sector, increasing privatisation and often high levels of unemployment: poverty and inequality grew rapidly, but so too did the incomes of many families. At the same time, from the late 1980s maternal employment began to increase rapidly, with far more women continuing in work on having children and fast rising employment rates among mothers with young children. While the welfare state in some important respects began to contract, state education expanded: school-leaving age was raised to 16 in 1972, a comprehensive system of secondary education mostly replaced the previous two-tier system, and higher education grew rapidly. Social change accelerated: cohabitation increased to the point where it preceded most first marriages; marriage rates fell and divorce rose; while births outside marriage, from being a relatively uncommon and stigmatised event as late as the 1960s, had come to account for nearly half of all births by the turn of the century.

The UK joined the European Union when this generation were still children (1973), while parenthood coincided with some immense changes of global proportions: the rise of 'market' or neo-liberal capitalism, an IT revolution and (perhaps not entirely unconnected) the collapse of the Soviet bloc, bringing with it the end of great power rivalry as the United States emerged as the world's only superpower.

The period that approximates to that covered by our three adult generations – from 1914 to the collapse of the USSR in 1991 – is described by Hobsbawm (1994) as the 'short twentieth century' in which a Golden Age of 'growth and transformation' is sandwiched between an Age of Catastrophe (two world wars and the inter-war years) and a period of 'decomposition and crisis' during the 1980s and 1990s.

The short Twentieth Century appears like a sort of triptych, or historical sandwich. An Age of Catastrophe from 1914 to the aftermath of the Second World War was followed by some twenty-five or thirty years of extraordinary economic growth and social transformation, which probably changed human society more profoundly than any other period of comparable brevity. In retrospect it can be seen as a sort of Golden Age, and was so seen almost immediately it had come to an end in the early 1970s. The last part of the century was a new era of decomposition, uncertainty and crisis... [I]ncreasingly it became clear that this was an era of long-term difficulties, for which capitalist countries sought radical solutions, often by following secular theologians of the unrestricted free market (pp. 6, 10).

Nikolas Rose (1999) tells a similar story of transformation over the 20th century. He describes the emergence of what he terms the 'social state', in reaction to the failings and ensuing dangers in the order of 19th century laissez-faire liberalism: 'by the early decades of the twentieth century, politicians in many different national contexts were under increasing pressure to accept that government of at least some aspects of [the] social domain should be added to the responsibilities of the political apparatus and its officials' (p. 117). Based on principles of solidarity and pooled risk, the welfare state emerged (pensions, for example, being introduced under the Liberal administration of 1908–15), but only achieving its fullest expression in the Labour Government's reforms after the Second World War. But during the 1970s, new forms of economic and political liberalism – neo-liberalism and advanced liberalism – begin to gain ground: the 'social' wanes and 'the individual' waxes, with a new emphasis on the citizen taking responsibility for the management of risk, both for herself and her family. The state increasingly assumes a role of forming and facilitating this citizen. In this extract, Rose draws our attention both to changing conditions and to changes in the type of 'ideal' subject that the state and economy create at different historical moments.

In the styles of government I have termed 'advanced liberal', the conception of the citizen is transformed. It became commonplace in the 1980s to hear talk of the 'active citizen' who was to be counterposed to the 'passive citizen' of the social state – the citizen of rights and duties, of obligations and expectations... [This] citizen was to conduct his or her life, and that of his or her family, as a kind of enterprise, seeking to enhance on existence itself through calculated acts and investments... Whilst social rule was characterized by discretionary authority, advanced liberal rule is characterized by the politics of the contract, in which the subject of the contract is not a patient or a case but a customer or consumer (pp. 164, 165).

Such historical analyses suggest we can locate our three generations in particular historical phases. Our great-grandparents, in the early part of their lives, live through Hobsbawm's Age of Catastrophe and Rose's emergent social state; our grandparents, during the same early years of their lives, are witness to the post-war Golden Age and the full flowering of the social state; while our parents come to adulthood in a new age of crisis, accompanied by the resurgence of economic and political liberalism. While such grand designs are helpful in constructing a context for

individual narratives, a note of caution is in order. People, as we suggest at various points, may experience their historical times in a very different light: some great-grandparents, as we shall see in later chapters, did look back on their childhood in Hobsbawm's Age of Catastrophe as one marked by great hardship but others who had a middle-class upbringing made no reference to the Great Depression. For some the Second World War was a period of change and emancipation; while the age of crisis of the 1980s and 1990s was to some an age of further opportunities in education, employment and lifestyles. Historical conditions can play an important part in shaping lives, but they do not determine everything and everyone, affecting people's lives differently according to the experiences and life chances, including those of the families to which they belong.

Moreover, people's lives do not fit neatly into historians' eras. Our grandparents, for example, may have spent their early years in Hobsbawm's Golden Age, but their more recent years have been lived in the following period of crisis. The historical influences on them, therefore, overlay one another and may create reversals and contradictions. Moreover, to return to our earlier discussion of time, looking back on the past is always from a position in the present, which will influence how the past is remembered and given meaning. From the present, the past may look much worse or much better than it was experienced at the time.

### **The shape of the book**

In writing and ordering the book's chapters, we have had to wrestle with three problematics. First is the issue of the individual's life course. Thus we have chosen to begin with a chapter on childhood (Chapter 2) and then to proceed to chapters which address the life course phase of bringing up young children (Chapters 3, 4 and 5). We have chosen this phase of parenting as a focus since this was a constant across the generations: the current phase reached by the third generation (parents) and a phase which had been experienced earlier by the two older generations but who were currently witnessing it as grandparents and great-grandparents. For both men and women in the three generations, this phase overlaps with employment and the ways in which they interweave their care and breadwinning responsibilities. In contrast Chapters 6 and 7 span the life course as they examine relations between family generations at different phases in the life course.

Our second problematic is the relations between family generations. We have analysed the cases at the level of the family or kin group and

sought to trace the relations, transfers and transmission processes *within* families (Chapters 3–7). However, in addition we have been able to analyse our individual cases in relation to cohorts or historical generations. For example, in Chapter 2 we examine childhood through the eyes of three cohorts of women and three historical periods. Thus we have had to cut our analysis of the material in different ways. We have also tried to manage a difficult balancing act, one which has to be faced by all who engage in case-study research, that is, the issue of moving from the level of the individual case to the larger case, in our study the multi-generation family. In writing the book we have sought also to do justice to the breadth of our cases while illustrating the relations and processes within particular families. Thus the chapters weave together intra-family analyses, analyses between families and analyses where we compare different cohorts.

The third problematic is the methodological strategy which hinges upon the particular biographical approach we have followed. This we have discussed earlier and involves making the theoretical link between biography and history. In seeking to achieve this aim, we have sought in our methodology to draw out and to integrate the contextual (historical) and biographical ‘facts’ of the individual family members with their subjective experiences and interpretations.

There is necessarily some variation in the way we have treated the cases. Much of the book focuses at the family levels (lines of mothers in a family, for example) or at the cohort levels (grandparents compared with parents and great-grandparents), the analyses of which are located in the macro-structural context that we have set. But at times we move to a more detailed analysis of individuals and the ‘biographical work’ they engage in both in thinking about their lives and in the course of the research interview (Chamberlayne and King, 2000, p. 131).

Writing up team research inevitably implies taking different theoretical slants and analytic strategies as each of us took responsibility for different parts of the analysis. One of us took responsibility for writing the first draft of the book and for weaving together the different slants taken in the analysis. Because of this and also for the reasons set out above, the approaches taken in each chapter differ somewhat.

Reflecting the beginning of the life course, in Chapter 2 we examine childhood. Since there were few men in the oldest generation we have focused on women and the changes and similarities in their historical and family experiences of childhood. Chapter 3 focuses on women’s and men’s changing careers in employment and childcare among successive generations, showing in particular the shifts that have taken

place in women's employment patterns especially among the youngest generation of today's mothers. An examination of motherhood in Chapter 4 is concerned with two aspects: intergenerational transmission within families – how women through their understandings and actions appear to identify with or distance themselves from the practices adopted by their own parents; and negotiating responsibilities, how women as mothers work out the relationship between employment and motherhood. Chapter 5 focuses on fatherhood over family generations: the timetabling of the transition to fatherhood; men's normative discourses about fatherhood; and the types of fatherhood practice men engaged in and how far such types of fatherhood are transmitted within families.

Running through Chapters 4 and 5 is the link between action and interpretation: how each generation interprets the norms of the time about what it means to be a 'proper' mother or father, both in the context of their individual situations and the historical period. Disjunctures emerge between actions and what interviewees say 'ought to happen', illustrating the interplay between the lived life and the told story – between structural forces and individual agency.

Intergenerational relations are the nub of Chapters 6 and 7. Chapter 6 looks at the transmission of material and care resources: what these transfers consist of, how and why they flow and, most importantly, the meanings given to them by different generations. Then in Chapter 7 we attempt to give some shape to what has gone before by proposing a typology of intergenerational relations and transfers, based on two factors: occupational and geographical mobility. We also insert here the concept of ambivalence, the other side of the coin to continuity and transmission, by which members of one generation differentiate themselves, to varying degrees, from previous generations. Finally, in Chapter 8 we draw some concluding thoughts, relating both to theory and policy.

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