**50 Years of Life in Britain – Transcript**

**Episode 2: Youthscan, the 1980s and reading for pleasure**

Lee Elliot Major 00:06

In one week in April 1970 17,000 mothers and their newborn babies were asked to take part in a survey to find out more about the first week of life. This became known as the 1970 British Cohort Study, BCS70. The study followed these babies as they grew, and continues to do so today. This year, the study turns 50. And so welcome to 50 Years of Life in Britain, a podcast celebrating half a century of the 1970 British Cohort Study.

I'm Lee Elliot Major, Professor of Social Mobility at the University of Exeter, and I'll be your host over the next six episodes as we trace the story of BCS70 across five decades and consider the future this amazing study. We started with the 1970s. And in the last episode Professor Jean Golding told us about the challenges of working on a birth cohort study before computers.

Jean Golding 01:06

All the information of the birth surveys were on punch cards; 17,000 cards. The team involved would be doing the sorts of things that we would do in terms of creating tables.

Lee Elliot Major 01:20

And Professor Leon Feinstein explained how his BCS70 research helped to improve preschool education for future generations.

Leon Feinstein 01.31

When you look at how the graph was used often, it was to emphasise the importance of the early years.

Lee Elliot Major 01.35

And so on to the 1980s. Brits might reminisce about the era of curly perms, big shoulder pads, J.R. Ewing and synth pop. But the British cohort studies found it tough going during this decade. The 1980s in Britain was a turbulent time to be growing up. Britain had been at war with Argentina. Unemployment was rising. There were race riots on the streets of major cities, and the miners’ strike devastated communities across large parts of the UK.

Study member 02:09

Taking in the charts on a Sunday night. Spandau Ballet and Madness and so on. All those era songs. I remember very clearly when Frankie Goes to Hollywood – Relax”, reached number one, but was banned by the BBC.

Study member 02:21

Prince Charles and Lady Diana getting married. I was waiting for her to rock up in her big dress. I think I watched that part where she stepped out in that endless train. And then I just got bored and went out on my skateboard.

Study member 02:38

We are still in Thatcher’s Britain, employment was a challenge at that time. Things perhaps look pretty bleak.

Study member 02:46

E.T., still one of my favourite films. I remember crying for about an hour afterwards.

Study member 03:03

Band Aid and Live Aid. I remember watching Live Aid with all my friends from school and it was such an exciting moment.

Study member 03:02

Grange Hill and Hammer House of Horror then there was a documentary called Threads about nuclear war which had a great effect on me, it was incredibly depressing. And one of the ever present things to be worried about at that time was the Russians were going to bomb us and we could all die from fallout any minute.

Study member 03:22

The media furore about who shot J.R. Ewing. I think I might even have had a T shirt that said “Who shot J.R.”?

Study member 03:32

I was living in Liverpool and one of my most vivid memories were the Toxteth riots. That was a very profound event that has a quite a big impact. Knowing that these riots were taking place, you know a few miles from where I live.

Study member 03:52

Also later on that decade, the fall of the Berlin Wall. I remember watching that on the television news at university. One of the students jumped up and said I have to go there. So he started planning straightaway and we heard from him then three days later and he was out there in Berlin taking part.

Lee Elliot Major 04:19

We’ll find out how study director Neville Butler managed to pull together enough funds to meet with the study's participants on two occasions in the 1980s. We'll also learn more about the special birthday party he threw for 4,000 study participants. In this episode, I'll be talking to current director of BCS70 Professor Alice Sullivan, about her research looking at the benefits of reading for pleasure for children’s progress in English and Maths. We’ll hear the memories of study participants who have taken part during their teenage years, and we'll find out more about that 19th birthday party. We'll also chat to Professor Scott Montgomery about those early years when the study was still based in Bristol. But first I'm going to talk to John Bynner, who shares some memories of Neville Butler, the mercurial founder both of the 1970 and 1958 birth cohort studies. John is a former director of BCS70. So I began by asking him how he became involved in the study.

John Bynner 05:22

Well I was working at the Open University at the time, and I was asked to find out why it was that people weren't using the 58 cohort. Government had got pretty fed up with it and decided that they wanted to move the thing over to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) where it became a research resource for people rather than something that was of direct government interest. So anyway, I did this study and came up with the fact that people couldn't use the study because it was simply too complicated. And it had been designed and used always in the past by the people who actually had created it. And they hadn't seen the need for documentation and all these things which become crucial for users. And that's what I came up with, a sort of programme that would enable much better interest in use to be generated about the study and also improve the documentation.

Lee Elliot Major 06:15

How important was this for enabling the BCS70 cohort to also be accessible for researchers?

John Bynner 06:25

Well, it was very important because it laid the ground really for a whole sort of ESRC interests, which didn't really exist in these studies at all. And once the whole thing started working for the 58 cohort, then it was much easier when we took over the 70 cohort to actually do a similar job on that. Because that hadn't been properly documented and no thought had been given to making it available to users or even deposited it in the data archive. So all these things had to be done in the early years and convincing ESRC of course that it was a worthwhile project for them to take up. They hadn't really got the idea of research resources of this kind, then. And so we were able to make the case, demonstrate the importance of the 70 cohort. And I was very keen to bring it in alongside with 58 because it hugely strengthened the both of them I felt, and that's why I managed to pull it off.

Lee Elliot Major 07:37

And in those days was this very much, was the whole social science community behind this or was it just a few of you who were sort of championing this survey?

John Bynner 07:49

Most people who tried to use these surveys hadn't gone anywhere. I met people who had them on available, you know, for years and they couldn't do it, they didn't know how to deal with this data. The use of data on this scale was very, very rare at that time, the whole world was entirely different. Nobody had laptops or desktops or anything of this sort everything was done by large mainframe computers. So getting all this sort of thing done was part of a whole movement, technological change, a transformation, the digital society, it all worked in with that, as well as actually making the case for using these studies. And increasingly, interest grew in them, because once people realised you could use them, you could have on your desktop, and you can then start raising questions. And initially, economists got very interested in them for the first time, and that was one of the lift offs and there were many others of that type.

Lee Elliot Major 08:52

Can you give us a sense of what then it was like to analyse data for research in the 1980s and early 90s compared to what it's like now? Managing and trying to digest this data, analyse it, it was very different, I assume in the 1980s, as compared to now where you literally just by, it's not trivial, but you know, literally can do it on your laptop.

John Bynner 09:16

There were just BBC computers, you know, things that just couldn't do anything. And there was a one giant sort of one gigabyte holding platform on which all research had to be done. There was absolutely utter dependence on other machinery. And of course, when the 58 cohort was originally located in the National Bureau of Child Studies it used to take its data to London University to actually get the analysis done. So you'd have to wait 24 hours or something, you know, before you got any results. And if you made mistakes in entering the data, then you would get nowhere you know, so the whole thing was infuriating, but people struggled along with it because they recognised the value of the data.

I mean, in the early days, when I was talking to Neville Butler about this kind of work, he didn't believe you could do anything like linking data or, you know, even joining up these birth cohort studies, you analysed them entirely separately. You know, analysis at that time was done with things like cards and whatnot, it wasn't even computerised. You know, people struggle with doing all this doing a lot of it by hand, but they couldn't really access thing by computers, and they couldn't deal with large scale data. This is the other transformation, you know, the data revolution, really in terms of what's available to researchers, but almost anybody who now wants to get hold of data and obviously government and every element of society takes all this for granted. But none of this really got off the ground much before the end of the 80s.

Lee Elliot Major 11:01

I want you to talk a little bit about how you then became director of that. I think it's both the 58 and 70 cohort studies? And also how you worked with Neville Butler, that's become an almost iconic name now?

John Bynner 11:15

Well, Neville asked me to join his committee on board of directors of his company it was that was set up to run this project, and he got very bogged down in the work involved in the Age 16 Study. That was the whole problem. So increasingly, I moved from being a director. And anyway, the long and short of it was it finally moved to a situation – but only in really the last year before moving – to sitting. When it was agreed that I would become the Director of it, and he would retire and funding had completely run out and all the rest of it. But he had some – he had a few, two or three grants that were passed to me as part of that job of actually taking over the project. And then we moved it to City University.

Lee Elliot Major 12:10

They are amazing studies, I think most people would say that now, but you'd think that the government would support it, and it would all be quite strategic, but actually what you realise it's all down to a few individuals who doggedly sort of champion the studies. You know, is that true for you and Neville? Was it like that?

John Bynner 12:30

Yes, it was. I mean, very much so. There was, I mean, it's hard to believe that ESRC had no interest in these projects whatsoever. I mean, they didn't see any need to fund them, support them until they were actually being asked or pretty well forced to by Government who said, you've got to take over these projects. But Neville, I mean, the thing about Neville was that he was an interesting character! He was an absolute charmer as you know, but also, in many respects, I think one of the most attractive things about Neville was that he had a real vision about this kind of work, but he absolutely believed that ultimately, they would realise their value, and then people would benefit hugely and, you know, understanding the problems that perceptual and or whatever, would be solved through these birth cohort studies. And that's where his importance, I think, is underlooked. In the sense that he kept on plugging away at this, but didn't have the resources, first of all resources of monetary financial to actually deal with it. He had to move into a national direction.

Lee Elliot Major 13:41

John Bynner, with a real insight into how he helped make the study data more accessible for the research community. The name Neville Butler keeps coming up. But who was he? Professor Butler was the founder of both the 1958 and the 1970 birth cohort studies. He's been described as possessing infectious enthusiasm for the cohorts. And as a paediatrician, he cared deeply about children's welfare. He was an irresistible charmer, and worked tirelessly to network with important politicians and celebrities in order to keep the study funded. Professor Scott Montgomery, a clinical epidemiologist at Örebro University, Sweden, recalls his experiences working with Neville Butler after he moved the 1970 study from the University of Bristol and set up his own charity to run the Age 16 Survey.

Scott Montgomery 14:32

So there I was in Bristol at the end of the 1980s, when I joined the International Centre for Child Studies (ICCS). And most of the people actually who were working in the study were physically based there. Of course, there was a small number of external collaborators, but all of us really were the small team based in Ashley Down House, Cotham Park. Which sounds rather grand. It was a large family house with a big garden, in fact. But, you know, really quite a large house because they housed all of us. And it was a rather a pleasant working environment, although perhaps you might describe it as ‘shabby chic’ – might be the way to describe how it was furnished.

The thing about Ashley Down House was it wasn't only the International Centre for Child Studies, and home to Youthscan, it was Neville’s home, that's where he lived, so he would be there and it felt like a home in that sense. So he was always there, of course – sometimes with guests – and, you know, working with him – you know, like anyone – that some people you know, there are ups and downs in any working relationship. Working with him, It was, you know, one remembered that he was one of the pioneers of longitudinal research. Starting with his interest in early life because he was a paediatrician. But then thinking about what happens later, even across generations. You know, I remember him telling me about one of his early memories of childhood. So he comes from a medical family. And his grandpa – I think it was his grandfather – he was describing, you know, how he did his rounds with the top hat, and drove, you know, a horse and trap to make his house calls. And so Neville had that incredibly long view from over the whole 20th century, seeing how things have changed, going from, you know, the G.P., behind his horse and a top hat to what was relatively modern then in embracing the computer technology that we had to.

So on the ground floor, there were people concerned with raising funds – there was somebody who was actually a dedicated research grant writer, whatever the subject. And then there were people who would raise funds charitably there as well. The next floor, the first floor was where I was, and that housed the epidemiologists, the people who worked with the data as well. And then upstairs again, you had a mixture of people ranging from psychologists, sociologists, and others. It was a family house as I said, a large one, but still, we knew each other very well. We saw all of each other every day. And the house was conveniently placed for the Cotham Porter Stores, a rather attractive little pub at the end of the street. And so at the end of the week, we'd often go there and enjoy some rough cider, because we're in Bristol after all.

Lee Elliot Major 17:36

Back in the 1980s, what else did the study tell us about the cohort at age 10?

Narrator 17:46

At age 10, one in three study participants went to the library often. Two in five said they were good at Maths. Half had caught the measles. One in seven had said they had tried a cigarette. One in 10 lived in lone parent families. Two in five ate chocolate every single day. Four in 10 helped their parents with the washing up.

Lee Elliot Major 18:15

Each episode we hear from BCS70 members sharing their memories of participating in the study. Here they reflect on what it was like taking part during the 1980s.

Study member 18:25

I remember the Age 10 Survey, it was quite, it was quite a big deal really, for me. I was the only one at my school. It's quite a small primary school and I was the only one who was taking part. And there was quite a lot of interest – everyone, all my friends were asking me what it was about and all that sort of thing. And I remember having to go into the headteacher’s office to do a whole load of tests and things. Spelling tests, I remember her reading out a whole load of spelling and things like that. And I had a morning off school as well I think when my mum took me to a health centre, where they weighed me and measured me and I had to walk along the line painted on the floor in a straight line and things like that, and I remember having to throw a ball in the air and see how many times l could clap before catching it. And yeah, I remember my mum was quite amazed how many times I could clap before catching the ball because I was renowned for being a bit rubbish, all that kind of thing. So, so that was quite good.

Study member 19:26

I think I was 16, was it at ’86 that test? And it would have been around O-Level time. And I just remember another small room and just these questionnaires that asked quite pertinent questions – I remember when I was 16 – the kind of questions that adults generally didn't ask teenagers. And they're quite refreshing to answer because you always felt like, okay, so my opinion matters. And someone's sort of listening to how I feel about things. They asked us about smoking, sex, drinking, all sorts of things that you just wouldn't dream of talking about probably to anybody over the age of 16. And so yeah, they're always quite stimulating to take part in and they made you think about yourself.

Lee Elliot Major 20:24

Professor Alice Sullivan has been director of the 1970 study since 2010. Alice was behind the surprising research findings that revealed how reading for pleasure during childhood helps children's progress not only in English, but also in Maths. I started by asking her about the 50th anniversary of the BCS70 study.

Alice Sullivan 20:45

I'd really like to wish the cohort members a very happy 50th birthday year. We're so sorry that we can't go out to see you all and interview you this year. And also, we're really sorry that all the events that we were planning for your birthdays have had to be postponed. We're so grateful for everything that you've done since you were born, for science and to shape our understanding of the society that we live in. So I hope that you'll continue to be part of the study for many, many more happy years to come.

The COVID-19 situation has obviously affected everything that we do. We were hoping to go to the cohort members’ homes and do face-to-face interviews this year. But obviously, we can't do that. So we're piloting doing interviews over video conferencing, which will be really interesting and obviously if that does work, it could be quite useful for the future. And then also of course, with the cohort members being 50 this year, we were planning lots of celebrations and events, which obviously cannot go ahead now. So we've had to postpone all of that till next year.

Lee Elliot Major 22:01

Let's get back to one of your areas of expertise: reading for pleasure, what did you actually find?

Alice Sullivan 22:07

I'm from an education background. I'm interested in education and learning. And so that's certainly influenced some of the priorities that I've had as a P.I. So for example, the fact that at age 42, we repeated a vocabulary test that the cohort members had done previously at age 16, was something that I put in because I was interested to see whether they'd been learning and developing their vocabularies in adult life, which then in turn was what led on to the reading for pleasure work, looking at the Age 16 because I thought, well, we're going to use these vocabulary skills again, better do some work on them in the 1986 data where they were first included. And so that was kind of quite serendipitous that out of that we found the enormous impact that reading for pleasure had on learning in childhood, and then we were able to develop it and find that reading continued to have an impact on developing people's vocabularies into midlife. We found that kids who read for pleasure when they were age 10, so in 1980 – of course, they scored better in cognitive tests at that age, but they also improved more. So we, of course, we have very rich information on cognition in the 1970 cohort, so lots of tests at age five at age 10, at age 16. And we were able to show that even compared with kids who had similar cognitive skills at age 10, the ones that read for pleasure, made more progress. They scored more highly in vocabulary at age 16, but they also scored more highly in mathematics as well. Which seems to suggest that the fact that they're reading and they're improving their vocabularies is also having knock on for other subjects.

Lee Elliot Major 24:05

Can you just define what you mean then by reading for pleasure as different from I know, having to read a textbook for school?

Alice Sullivan 24:15

So reading for pleasure really just means reading that no one is forcing you to do that you're doing for your own sake. So it's not homework and it's not work. It's just, it's a leisure activity.

Lee Elliot Major 24:29

Liz, one of the study members spent a lot of her early years in the library close to her home.

Liz 24:36

So the library was hugely influential in my life. So we had a park at the top of the road, and we had a library at the bottom of the road. And those two things, really were my salvation, particularly the library at the bottom the road. So not having a car, not having a lot of money, the library was my freedom. And I could spend as much time as I wanted in that library. So my Saturdays I would spend huge parts of the day in the library. You were allowed to get two books out. And that was, that was fantastic. And I always imagined that one day I would become a librarian. And that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a librarian, because I thought it must be the most fantastic job in the world to be allowed to spend the whole day in the library and get paid for it. And I imagined that the librarians could read every book that came in and that they were able to select the books that they read. So the library was a massive part of my life.

Lee Elliot Major 25:41

And is there any evidence on whether it's the ‘quality’, I'm putting that in inverted commas, of the actual books that are being read, does that seem to have any impact or do we not have any details on that?

Alice Sullivan 25:52

So that's a really interesting question. And what we found was actually it matters quite a lot, what genre you're reading, and reading more demanding fiction is the thing that really is associated with the biggest vocabulary gains.

Liz 26:09

As I got a little bit older, and I got more interested in biology, I would take myself off to the library, and they used to subscribe to New Scientist magazine. And I would spend my time reading New Scientist magazine, not really understanding most of what was contained within it. But just thinking, wow, this is exciting. This is really something that, you know, people are researching and the scientists out there and they are, you know, learning all of these things. So the library, it was a huge part of my life. They're happy places for me. The information on the shelves, and the pleasure that the books can bring, that's just so wonderful. But I think the source of love of learning came from, you know, a combination of factors and the opportunities that I was given. So I had, you know, great encouragement from my parents, I had great encouragement from teachers. And also I had the resources at my fingertips as well. So the opportunity to access books. And I think that combination of factors sort of led me to continue in education.

Lee Elliot Major 27:28

How much of this is causal do you think?

Alice Sullivan 27:32

You can never really prove it beyond reasonable doubt and reading for pleasure, of course, it's something that you can't force people to do. So even if you could, in theory, do an experiment and allocate randomly to a reading for pleasure group and not, you could never do that because you can't force someone to do something for pleasure. It would be a different thing if they were doing it because they've been told to do it. So, in some sense that makes the kind of causal element to it even more difficult, even in theory. If we take reading for pleasure, for example – obviously, bright kids are more likely to read for pleasure. So they're more likely to read for pleasure because they're bright. So then how can you argue that the reading for pleasure has actually made them brighter? Well, that's where the changing over time comes. So you can compare people who had very similar cognitive skills at age 10, but one of them reads for pleasure and the other doesn't, and see how much more learning there is then between the ages of 10 and 16. It doesn't prove causality, but combining that with controlling for some of the other things that might be linked, both to reading for pleasure and to the outcome of learning, such as the obvious things like parents’ education and social class and so on. Once you have enough of those kinds of things in the model, you feel a bit more confident that at least your causal interpretation is, you know, a plausible interpretation and you've ruled out some of the other plausible interpretations that are non-causal.

But I think what happens when you read is that you are exposed to so many more words than you would be just through conversation. And so people have done studies where they look at the number of different words, even in children's books, compared to an adult conversation. And there's far more diversity of language in a storybook, even a kid’s book. So the causal story is simply that you know, you're exposing yourself to a lot more words and as such, you learn those words. What we were able to do that previous studies hadn't done, because there were lots of cross sectional studies saying, look bright kids read more so probably readings really good and it's just a bit unconvincing, because of course, we all know that – we all know that bright kids read more. So it's being able to show that they actually pull away from their peers who were equally bright at age 10, by the time they're 16.

Lee Elliot Major 30:01

So how did your research impact on policy or practice?

Alice Sullivan 30:06

So the findings have been taken up by every major literacy organisation, and they've been taken up by politicians across the political spectrum. So they've been cited by David Blunkett in a Labour policy review. They've been cited by Nick Gibb for the Conservatives as Schools Minister. So I think that's one of the nice things about these findings. They're not kind of controversial or party political in a way. They seem to appeal to everybody, from parents, to teachers, to librarians, to policymakers. Because I think people do understand that learning is more than just being sort of crammed for a test. The power of reading is a deeper kind of learning. And I think that being able to show that based on a really solid scientific base as well with a very large, nationally representative longitudinal data set, I think has given a lot of confidence for people like literacy organisations who want to make that argument anyway, to be on very solid ground and saying, you know what, reading is very important.

Lee Elliot Major 31:16

Back in the 1980s here's what the BCS70 study can tell us about life at that time.

Narrator 31:23

At age 16, two thirds of study participants drank alcohol the week before their interview. They received an average £4 pocket money a week. One in five bleached their hair. Two in five had a job during term time. One in five listened to heavy rock music. 20% had takeaways twice a week or more. Three in five had friends around every week.

Lee Elliot Major 31:59

What about that famous 19th birthday surprise? Emma and Sam reflect on the amazing invitation they received to go to Alton Towers and have the theme park all to themselves only with 4,000 other members of the cohort.

Emma 32:18

I’d just gone to university, and I met one of my neighbours, one of the other students who lived on the same corridor as me. I discovered that his birthday was in the same week as me. And we discovered that we were both in this study together. And then we both got the invitation to come to Alton Towers, so we decided to go together. And it was really good fun. We had a great day. Yeah, it was really good to see all these other young people there, all the same age as us. It was really, really good fun.

Sam 32:50

I went! I was there. Yeah, and I took my best friend and we went on the Corkscrew. And I remember having the park to ourselves. That celebration was the hottest ticket in town. And, and obviously, it was exclusive as well. So that was really special, one of my lasting memories of my late teens, and also being an 18 year old girl, and going there with my best friend. We were obviously like, oh, I wonder if there's any hot boys?! You know, as you do. It was just a really fun day out.

Lee Elliot Major 33:26

And then Neville Butler made his great entrance.

Emma 33:28

There was a sort of parade. And he was standing in this sort of – I don’t know, it’s a bit like a Pope mobile, you know the sort of thing! And he was standing on that. And it was going past and he was waving at everyone. He looked a bit, he had kind of – I don't know if this is a real memory or if I've just made this up, but in my memory he had kind of bushy white hair a bit like Einstein, and he was just waving at everyone and everyone was waving and cheering at him.

Lee Elliot Major 34:03

In the next episode, we're moving to the 1990s to find out how the study and its staff survived the lean years, the 1980s and the 1990s, and managed to get back into contact with study participants after a 10 year gap. We'll learn how the study's findings on adult literacy and numeracy helped people across Britain face their learning gremlins.

Younger child 34:26

Mum, how do you spell choir?  
  
Mum 34.28

That’s a tough one, isn’t it!

Older child 34.31

You don't know do you? Mummy can’t spell!

Mum 34:34

Oh that is so embarrassing!

Lee Elliot Major 34:36

We’ll also ask study participants what it was like to join the study again as adults and find out how they were getting on in the big wide world after the boom and bust years. See you next week.

Narrator 34:52

50 Years of Life in Britain, powered by UCL Minds. I hope you subscribe to join the celebration.