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

**Episode 4 – Social mobility, the 2000s and the gender pay gap**

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 as we trace the story of BCS70 across five decades and consider the future of this amazing study. In our last episode, we learned how the academics, the staff running BCS70 kept it going while struggling on monthly contracts, before their efforts gained long overdue recognition when Labour came to power in 1997.

Kate Smith 01:04

There was recognition amongst politicians of the real value of the studies and what they could bring to the table.

Lee Elliot Major 01:11

And we also found out how the study helped British adults improve their literacy and numeracy skills.

Sue Pember 01:17

That research shows that over 14 million people improved their skills. It was one of the largest social interventions we've ever tried in England and it absolutely worked.

Lee Elliot Major 01:30

Now onto the new millennium. The 2000s would be marked by both optimism and anxiety. Government stability and the booming economy in the early years of the decade would later be overshadowed by terrorist attacks in New York and London, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a global recession. But what was life like for our study members as they reached their 30s?

Study member 01:57

Going into the year 2000 all the talk was about the millennium bug and whether the world was going to come to an end, because of our computers were all going to go down. Of course that didn't materialise. And then, early on in the noughties, of course, the major world event was 9/11.

Study member 02:16

The terror attack of 9/11 and that was the start of George Bush's War on Terror and us getting involved as well in the UK, and war with Afghanistan and war with Iraq, and terrible times really.

Study member 02:35

By the beginning of the 2000s I'd secured a graduate level job, I was on a reasonable wage, and so I bought a house and I put it off for quite some time. I was inspired by lots of makeover shows and Grand Designs and so on. So bought a very rundown ex-student rental property and spent 18 months doing it up and that was an enormous amount of fun.

Study member 02:56

For me, the 2000s were dominated by bringing up children. My oldest child, my son started school in 2001 and just before he started school we moved. We moved from the North West, down to the Midlands, and that's where we've lived ever since.

Study member 03:15

I think I was a bit of a yuppie, in my early 30s. Ate out at nice restaurants, went to art galleries, shopped till I dropped, had an Apple Mac at home, which I absolutely adored and less responsibilities at that point in my early 30s. A bit of a heyday.

Study member 03:36

It was a really good time to be in school, actually, because it was when Tony Blair and New Labour were in power and their slogan for getting into power was "Education, education, and education". And during that time, they really put in a lot more money into primary schools and I think that you could really see the improvements happening.

Study member 04:03

In 2008, Barack Obama won the US presidential election and it was very well received over here. People are very happy about it, to see the back of Bush and hopefully to see the back of war.

Lee Elliot Major 04:15

For BCS70, the birth cohort studies in social science, the 2000s would be a golden decade. With the study becoming greatly valued by scientists and policymakers, it was funded to meet participants on three occasions, ages 30, 34 and 38. Researchers from across the globe started using BCS70 alongside other birth cohort studies to see how members of Generation X were faring compared with other generations. This led to a series of important new findings on education, employment and social mobility, which would continue to influence public and scientific debate for years to come. And with New Labour funding the Millennium Cohort Study, the first new birth cohort since 1970, another jewel would be added to the already glittering crown of British social science. This week we'll be chatting to Dr. Jo Blanden, reader in economics at the University of Surrey, who will discuss her research on social mobility. We'll also be speaking to former Universities Minister, Lord David Willetts, about the impact of BCS70 and the cohort studies on government thinking. And we'll be hearing from study members about their changing lives and new responsibilities as 30 somethings in the new millennium. But first we catch up with Professor Heather Joshi. Heather is a former director of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies and one of the founders of the Millennium Cohort Study. She told us about her ongoing BCS70 research on the gender pay gap and her influential study looking at working mothers and children's development.

Lee Elliot Major 05:50

So can you tell me a bit about your own research? You've done loads of work on the gender pay gap which has become increasingly focused on in public policy and debate.

Heather Joshi 06:01

We can use all four of the cohort studies now, to sort of track this progression over time in that the education and work experience related gaps are coming down across cohorts. But within any one cohort, they get worse because the 20-year-olds have got more or less the same work experience, whether they're men or women, and by the time they're in their 40s women have had a lot of time out and men have not, so that drives their wages apart whatever cohort they're in. But if they're in a more recent cohort, the pay gap comes down. And for the 1970 cohort, which is what we're particularly interested in here, we can see that there was about somewhere around the 10% penalty for being female, which has been following them through so far, from age 26 to age 42. Whereas in the previous cohorts that kind of gender premium was bigger, like 15 or 16% for the 1958 cohort.

Lee Elliot Major 07:11

Can you say anything particularly on gender pay and things like that – you know, was there any impact that you're aware of on policy or indeed practice?

Heather Joshi 07:20

Well the work that I did on the impact on children of mothers' employment was initiated in collaboration with an MP who is now the Mother of the House.

Lee Elliot Major 07:33

Who was that, Heather?

Heather Joshi 07:34

Harriet Harman.

Lee Elliot Major 07:35

Oh, Harriet Harman.

Heather Joshi 07:36

That Labour government was interested in reforming the institutions about parental employment. We looked at the children of the 1970 cohort, who were the subject of a sub-study when their parents were aged 34. So their mothers were asked to rate their behaviour and they were given cognitive tests in maths and reading so that there was a way of connecting children's development, children's outcomes with their home background and what their parents had been doing since they were born. The children whose mothers had gone to work were on the whole doing better than the children whose mothers hadn't, so then we say well, that's odd – because the children's mothers who go out to work have got some other characteristics that are associated with their being employed and with their children doing well. And when we control for that, we still didn't unearth any negative association. So I think the results of our study helped and encouraged them to proceed with those policies. Because it was an idea whose time had come. Increased paternal employment was accompanied by childcare leave for fathers, flexible working, the whole package.

Lee Elliot Major 08:57

And what year did that come in then? Just remind us, so what year did those policies come in?

Heather Joshi 09:03

While the maternity leave policies were being introduced gradually in 2002/03. The National Childcare Strategy had been announced in 1998. But Sure Start was being rolled out, taking different forms. I think it was about 2004/05 that they weren't really big on opening centres, a large number of centres with a big emphasis on childcare and maternal employment. The shared parental leave didn't come until about 2010 with the Coalition government.

Lee Elliot Major 09:39

What's it been like for female members of the study as they try to balance motherhood with their careers? Here Gillian shares her thoughts.

Study member 09:47

We were encouraged to feel that you could have an amazing career. You could also have a fantastic family life and you know, lovely home and all that sort of thing. And actually, that's been a huge pressure because I don't think it's possible, there aren't enough hours in the day for you to have a fantastic career and be a great mum. I think everybody, we will have to make our choices, but it was sort of that whole 1980s you know, the big power shoulders and all that sort of stuff, that you could go off and have a great career in the city, but then you'd be, you know, at home baking cakes with your perfect kids and you know, your wonderful husband and your amazing family home. And that is just not how life works outs. Not for me anyway. We were led to believe that we could have it all and it's just not possible. And it leads to almost like a sense of failure, that you haven't managed it. Which doesn't mean I'm dissatisfied with my life at all, but it's just, it hasn't worked out the way I thought it would. I'm not, not that power person in my career or, you know, I'm an average parent, because it's quite hard work and challenging. It was a peculiar time I think and it did put a lot of pressure on people, but maybe other generations feel that as well.

Lee Elliot Major 11:09

Let's now travel back two decades to hear what life is like for members of Generation X and their families at the turn of the new century,

Narrator 11:17

At age 30, 2 in 5 participants felt they did not spend enough time with their children. Two thirds are in their own homes, and the average house price was £64,000. Three quarters were satisfied with their job. Almost half said it interfered with family life. Half had a computer at home, a quarter said they exercised every day, but 1 in 10 kept fit less than once a week. A half ate fresh fruit at least once a day. 55% voted for Labour in the 1997 general election.

Lee Elliot Major 12:00

The 1970 study has been used by economists and sociologists to explore a range of issues around education, employment, earnings and social class. One of the topics that prompted much public debate over the past two decades is social mobility, which assesses how much people's early life circumstances are linked to their later outcomes in adulthood. It's such an important debate as it relates to questions about equality of opportunity and fairness in society, and the factors that shape our life prospects. The 1970 study has been useful for looking at whether members of Generation X are more or less likely to climb the social ladder compared to the Baby Boomers before them. Here, study members Liz and Mike talk about their childhoods and experiences in education.

Mike 12:52

Aspiration wasn't really a thing in our household, and certainly not my school. I didn't even understand what the word “university” meant. There is no sense of, this is what you do next and so on and so on. Most people in my school were just looking forward to the day they finished school so they could work down Tesco and earn enough money for a few beers on a Friday night. That was kind of the limits of thinking in my social crowds. However, being part of that apprenticeship programme I was sort of mixing with different people who, you know, considered education part and parcel of everyday life. So I completed four years of night school, doing a B.Tech in engineering and by the end of the training programme they had done an aptitude test for university candidates and said, “Look, you're very much in the squad as you were so if you wanted to do that, that's absolutely your right to do so” which I ended up doing. So I joined a first year engineering degree programme and by the end of that I decided I wanted to change tack and I transferred to art school, but the main insight for me was having always considered people in suits and people are better than me; they give the orders and the rest of us just listen. Having been to university and mixed with these people, I realised that they're all the same, and they're no better than me. And there's a real moment of awakening where I thought my voice, as a person, as a citizen of England, is just as valid as anybody else's. And I kind of felt it incumbent upon me to get involved a bit more – not be, you know, down a heel and quiet and obedient, but standing up for what I thought should be stood up for.

Liz 14:35

When I reflect back, the challenges were probably financial – I was aware that there wasn't much money around at that time. I didn't necessarily think I was very different from anyone else. There was quite a jump when I went from primary school to senior school in that when I went to senior school many of my friends' parents had professional jobs, so they were teachers, they were architects and that opened up an opportunity to me, so sort of finding out what jobs there were out there, and realising that the expectations were that people would go to university and that I hadn't been – that I’d never been pushed. I don't think university had ever been mentioned to me as a young child. But I think slowly, in my teenage years, I came to the realisation that this was an opportunity. And I can certainly say that university was never pushed upon me, but I can certainly remember a time when I was shopping with my mum and because we didn't have a car we used to have to walk to, we used to call it the village and we used to walk to the local shops, which were probably three quarters of a mile away and it was a very depressed part of Liverpool. And many of the shops were closed, there were high levels of unemployment at that time. And I can remember carrying heavy shopping bags back with my mum, and we would – she would go shopping once a week and take myself and my brother and we would help her carry the shopping back. And we'd be carrying this heavy shopping back. And I can remember saying "Is this how it's always going to be? Is it always going to be this hard"? And my mum very clearly saying "No, just keep, just work hard. Just stick with your books and you can have whatever you want". I think my parents encouraged me in that they presented to me that there were options and opportunities and they always wanted the best for me, and they wanted to give me every opportunity they could possibly afford.

Lee Elliot Major 16:51

Dr Jo Blanden, reader in economics at the University of Surrey, told us how BCS70 and the cohort studies have informed debates on social mobility.

Jo Blanden 17:01

In about 1999, I was doing my Master's in economics at University College London. And I've been taught by this guy called Steve Machin. And he already had a couple of things going in this kind of area, but with the NCDS, the previous 1958 cohort. So he'd already done a study which looked at how family background affected children’s outcomes in that data, and demonstrated in that that those who came from a disadvantaged background had a higher chance of a number of negative outcomes in later life, like being out of work, having low qualifications, having a child outside of marriage, and even being in trouble with the law. So, in my Master's dissertation, I started this process by doing a comparative study of how being brought up in disadvantage affected later outcomes in both the NCDS and BCS, but I do remember that it was striking that if parents reported they had experienced financial difficulties, this seemed to be more important for later outcomes in the later cohort, the BCS than in the NCDS. So this was the first hint really, that social mobility might have got worse for children growing up in the late 70s, early 80s for those growing up in the 1960s.

Lee Elliot Major 18:09

So it's amazing, isn't it, these things – because it was all about timing, wasn't it? You know, so how many people would love to do a Master's and PhD thesis that had so much impact? And you obviously spotted something that was really interesting, but it was the sort of right time, right place.

Jo Blanden 18:26

Yeah, absolutely and in fact, I carried on, as you say, into my PhD thesis, to look at this question of intergenerational income mobility that others had already started, but with this new BCS data. So that was really interesting. And what we then found out, of course, is that the intergenerational income mobility, so the relationship between family income when you were growing up and your own earnings when you were, you know, an adulthood got stronger in the BCS compared to the NCDS. So I think the really interesting thing about the BCS is that it enabled us to do this kind of comparison, and really find out a lot about how people born in 1970, how their lives were different from those who were 12 years older. And, and this was a really important point to look at, because it was in kind of Thatcher's Britain, you know, when inequality was rising, and you know, people were potentially having, some people were having a difficult time and some people were doing really well. So it's really important point in time to look at, and the fact that social mobility was lower than it had been previously – really emphasised how important it was to think about why some people were facing more or less advantages in life.

Lee Elliot Major 19:44

But to what extent Jo, given your work, do you think that education drives social mobility?

Jo Blanden 19:51

Um I think it's really clear that education is important. I mean, the first thing we did when we found that there were differences in intergenerational income mobility between the cohorts is to try and find out why. So if you can see that over time education has become more determined by family background, and then you also find that education's got big. You know, people with more education earn more and have higher incomes and standard of living, then you can kind of think, okay, education is probably quite an important reason why things have changed. So it was actually the case that the great majority of increase in intergenerational persistence that we saw between the cohorts could be accounted for the strengthening of the relationship between parental income and children's performance in the education system. And this was backed up actually by some other work that I that I did with Steve, which looked at who benefited from the expansion in the share of young people going to university. Because we know that a lot more people got university educations in the BCS compared to the NCDS. And we find that actually a lot of the people who benefited were actually quite rich. They were from quite well-off background, sort of the top 20%. And that's actually been something that kind of continued after that as well.

Lee Elliot Major 21:08

I think we can say, Jo, that your work had a huge impact. But I guess I wonder what you feel now nearly 20 years on – whether government policy actually has been improved or not in relation to what you found. You know, what, what are the pluses and minuses in that?

Jo Blanden 21:29

We made loads of presentations in government about it, including at one point a meeting in the number 10 Cabinet Room when Brown was Prime Minister. And that's been hugely important for all sorts of policies, you know, led to the set-up of the Social Mobility Commission, led to all sorts of policies on intervening with children very early because we found out that these gaps opened up early in the in the BCS. So things like nursery places, Family Nurse Partnerships, health visitors, Sure Start. And also the fact that emphasising the importance of education for where people ended up in life has meant, you know that people are really, really conscious of inequalities in access to education. And a lot of that is what's behind the widening participation agenda. Some of the work that the Office for Students has done, you know, all of those things are really fundamentally influenced by the BCS as well as other data sets. It's definitely a good timing issue here. You know, this was exactly what they were thinking about, you know, Tony Blair had said, when he came into office, “I don't mind about inequality between the richest and poorest in adults”, but there is an implication that he did care about the impact on children. And of course, child poverty was a massive issue at that point as well. Everyone was very worried about that. So it just completely fitted into the narrative. I mean, I think many of the policies which we probably contributed to on a minor level are pretty sensible ones. And also at this time, there was a kind of culture of evaluation in government as well. So many of these things were evaluated. And in fact, the Family Nurse Partnerships, you know, a colleague of mine Sarah Cattan at the IFS has been looking at that. And similarly, actually the same research team has found that Sure Start had some quite unexpectedly big effects on health, even though we thought, oh actually Sure Start didn't make much difference, it was, it was overtaken by kind of middle class people. Well, actually, it seems to have made much more difference than we thought now we've had nearly 20 years to look back on it. So I think many of these policies were quite positive.

Lee Elliot Major 23:30

It is interesting, because you've actually been involved in lots of research that have backed up that central narrative that the 70 cohort was less mobile than the 58 cohort but that debate tends to focus really on that narrow correlation on income – but you've done a load of other stuff but does that, you know, the poverty stuff but does that lead you to different policy implications, doesn't it? Because that could lead you to the impression that actually what we need to do is just redistribute money better, higher taxation, you know, give poor families money – where do you stand on that, as opposed to the more social mobility type policies, which don't tend to tackle those issues?

Jo Blanden 24:13

We had this idea and we were actually commissioned by government to do this, to look at why young, you know, those who grew up poor but weren't observed as poor in our data, when they're adults. You know, why was that? How did they buck the trend? So, one thing that we found, and this really speaks to your question about whether it's money or what, is the level of parental interest in the child's education was really important. So if fathers really cared about their son's education, then this had a big influence on whether the son you know, prevented, reduced the chances of the son ending up in poverty, even if the father, the parents were poor, okay. And the same thing for mothers' interest in education for daughters, okay. And also the early test scores that we observed had a big protective factor. And okay, of course, you know, these kids are probably going to end up doing better in their education because they're, you know, they had a higher earning ability. So education is coming into it there as well. And they actually showed that for boys, being in a classroom with more able children actually reduced their chances of ending up in poverty. So there's a kind of peer group effect.

Lee Elliot Major 25:24

I know, it's early days, and you won't have data on it yet, but just from what you can see happening in the COVID crisis – and there has been some rapid research done that's showing that possibly gaps are widening again. Have you got any sense of what you think this impact might have for the next generation?

Jo Blanden 25:45

I mean, yeah, it doesn't look great. I mean, I'm already kind of looking at my own children. You know, I've got one in Year 6 and one in Year 4. So my child is in Year 6 is back in a class size of 10. It's like, it's like being a posh school! So he's absolutely delighted. But the idea of my daughter not getting any schooling for six months, is really not great. And I mean it's difficult for us to provide the educational simulation that she needs. And, you know, she's got one parent who can spend lots of time with her and the other one who spends some time with her; we're learning Italian! And, you know, and even still, the structure is not the same as what she'd be receiving at school. And so it's really difficult. And of course, you know, most people aren't, aren't as equipped to offer, you know, to educate their children as we are. So I think it's going to be enormously problematic. And of course, the other issue is not just for children who are now in school, but it's for those who are coming into the labour market at this point. When it's going to be incredibly difficult because we know that there's going to be a recession - well, we're already in one, but you know that this is going to have some long-term implications. And we know actually from the NCDS and BCS what the implication of, you know, going into the labour market in a recession or in an area with high unemployment is really difficult for young people and has effects that last a long time.

Lee Elliot Major 27:14

So the study was funded to meet participants on three occasions during the 2000s. It looks like Generation X had their hands full during this decade. Here are some results from the Age 34 and Age 38 surveys.

Narrator 27:28

By age 34, 6 in 10 participants would become parents. 1 in 7 practiced a religion. A quarter said they did not trust people in their local area. At age 38, 2 in 5 women were working full time. 45 hours a week was average working hours for men, 32 hours for women. A quarter reported their health as excellent. 1 in 7 had achieved a qualification between the ages of 34 and 38.

Lee Elliot Major 28:06

Lord David Willetts was Universities and Science Minister during the Coalition government. He is now the President of the Resolution Foundation, a think tank that focuses on improving the living standards of those on low to middle incomes. As a minister, he was responsible for overseeing the funding of the cohort studies. And as a writer, he has shown his intimate understanding of British social science in his book, *The Pinch*. I started by asking Lord Willetts when he first became aware of the cohort studies.

Lord Willetts 28:34

Well, it's quite hard to pin down I mean, the cohort studies have been an important part of kind of British social policy for many years. So I would say right back when I was involved in running a think tank in the run up to the 1992 election, and then as a backbencher, serving on the Social Security Select Committee. Our cohort studies have always been a key part of how we've tried to monitor and track social change in Britain. So I would say for decades and gradually, as the results have started being produced, it's had more and more of an effect.

Lee Elliot Major 29:09

So do you think it's been used as much now as it was then, because there has been a bit of a sort of debate about the use of expertise?

Lord Willetts 29:17

Oh, yeah. And I think actually it gets more and more valuable, because that's the value of maintaining these cohort studies and regularly going back to the participants and getting more information, it means that all the classic things that people experience in midlife – be it, unemployment, mental illness, or whatever – you can track back and see if there are features in people's earlier experiences that help explain what they're going through in adulthood. So yes, I think these studies become more and more valuable.

Lee Elliot Major 29:50

But what do you think are the most important findings from the cohort study? Because there's been so many there. I mean, you mentioned mental health. What are the other big headline findings for you?

Lord Willetts 29:59

Well, let's face it, social mobility is the big one. I look at it as your master mind special subject so I'm very wary about getting into it. But I would say social mobility is probably the most fertile single area and of course, it's where you compare different cohort studies. We should have mentioned, I think the real, the 1970 cohort study is valuable in its own right. But its value is massively increased when you compare it with the 1958 birth cohort study. And as you know, probably the social mobility debate in the last few years was ignited by those comparisons of the 1958 birth cohort and the 1970 birth cohort, in terms of the extent to which people whose parents were in a high or low income category themselves moved into low or high income categories. And it looked as if there was less mobility for the 1970 cohort study than the 1958. So that's a very powerful finding. I have to say it's a reminder of the constraints, two points does not make a trend but nevertheless, I think that, that work ignited a very lively debate on social mobility.

Lee Elliot Major 31:12

Did you find that quite difficult that even with a rich study like the cohorts, you know, that convincing colleagues was actually more difficult even though you had the evidence?

Lord Willetts 31:23

Yeah. Well, of course, the answer is yes. Because evidence is rarely absolutely conclusive. And especially as there were lively debates about the interpretation of evidence from the 70 and 58 cohort studies, and of course, I had colleagues who said, “we see why social mobility has declined: the kids in 58 might have had an opportunity to go to grammar school and the kids in 1970 didn't, so that's the explanation.” And indeed, I got into the evidence that grammar schools were sadly not recruiting many kids from disadvantaged backgrounds and giving them a kind of booster rocket. If anything, they were recruiting kids from by and large, pretty advantaged backgrounds. But I mean, to be fair to him, Nick Clegg had a Cabinet Committee on Social Mobility, which I sat on. And Nick was open to that kind of debate. And I think the evidence is you tracked people through the lifecycle, influenced policies on things like opening up access to our most prestigious universities for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds. So yes, it was it was part of the debate. It was rarely the kind of trump card that you played, that suddenly resolved everything. But it was definitely part of the debate and talked about.

Lee Elliot Major 32:40

This podcast we are trying to really just emphasise the special nature of the cohorts. I think you've spoken about that already. But is there any final word you'd say about just why they're special and important?

Lord Willetts 32:53

Yeah, I would. I would add one other point, Lee, and it's this: that here we are in Britain, a prosperous country, an advanced western country with a sophisticated science base. I think we should remember how important these type of studies are in developing countries, how important it is for them, because let's face it, many of them are going through incredibly rapid social and economic change, perhaps more rapid than what we go through. And I have been in a Shanghai hospital, and observed how the babies as they were born, were all being introduced into a Shanghai birth cohort study so that they could track those babies through their lives and they looked to British social science and British cohort studies as a model for how to do it. So I think the fact that we make a contribution to social science around the world is a very important aspect of these cohort studies, which is probably insufficiently appreciated.

Lee Elliot Major 34:02

In the next episode, we're moving to the 2010s to find out how our study members were faring in middle age. We'll learn how BCS70 cast light on increasing rates of mental ill health among men. And find out more about the most recent biomedical survey where participants were given a midlife health M.O.T. We'll also be chatting to one of our in-house study detectives about the role they play tracing long lost study participants. See you next week.

Narrator 34:35

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