

## Extended abstract - What counts as data? Investigating and re-visioning the value of the United Kingdom's National Survey of Health and Development for the socio-historical study of young lives

Intended principally as a source of 'big data', cohort studies nevertheless offer rich insights into the lived experiences and meanings of young people's life transitions. This paper critically examines the potential of the UK National Survey of Health and Development (NSHD) to enrich historical and social scientific understandings of young women's pathways into adulthood in postwar Britain. While much has been written about youth and popular culture in this period, understandings of young women's lives remain underdeveloped. Yet, this generation of women has immense historical and contemporary significance. As young women, they were in the vanguard of postwar social change and are now part of the largest group of over-60s in British history. They are redefining ageing and making new demands on, and contributions to, society. Their pioneering approach to later life is widely believed to be shaped partly by their experiences of growing up. This paper reflects on the challenges and opportunities of using questionnaires and related records produced for the NSHD as data for research into young women's experiences of life transitions. NSHD data are inscribed in various degrees with the voices, interests, and perspectives of adults, institutions, and the state. Despite this, questionnaires and related records contain traces of postwar women's own priorities and reflections – in other words, the 'small stories' that make up some of their youth experiences. These 'small stories' challenge what is recognised as data by the NSHD and the wider field of cohort research, as well as by those who have argued for the qualitative restudy of existing cohort studies. We argue that repurposing cohort studies for the qualitative analysis of young lives entails a more expansive conception of what constitute 'data' and a willingness to go beyond the original parameters of the studies.

We are researching the experiences of girls growing up in Britain in the postwar decades. The NSHD follows circa 11,000 people born in 1946 from their birth to the present. This study has so far been used to generate statistics about this cohort, but does it have more to offer, and if so how? In our paper, we explore how we might approach longitudinal surveys to gain insights into a person and their life (that is, something that shifts over time, has a

duration and various stories that can be told about it). We consider how we can use qualitative methods to work with data about persons that has already been generated as part of a longitudinal survey, that is, qualitative secondary analysis of a pre-existing and ongoing survey. This is different from the more common strategy of ‘adding narratives to numbers’, that is, employing qualitative interviews alongside, and in dialogue with, quantitative longitudinal survey data.

Our paper will look at:

- why it is useful to qualitatively rework longitudinal surveys
- approach 1 – working with coded data: other studies
- approach 2 - scavenging and redefining what constitutes ‘data’; insights into scavenging from developments in other fields; different types of data in the NSHD.
- What we can discover about persons by scavenging: participant’s experiences, views etc; relationships; temporalities.
- Composing a person and their life: reflexivity; conceptualising our practice

### **Why recompose the person in a survey?**

Why try to recompose, and study, persons using data generated in quantitative surveys? Is this a productive use of resources? In the context of funding stringencies, we suggest that it is pragmatic to consider ways to maximise the productivity and value of existing longitudinal surveys. The UK has incredible longitudinal surveys, including birth cohort studies; the earliest being the 1946 National Study of Health and Development (NSHD). Longitudinal surveys contain huge quantities of data about a large number of individuals, including those who might otherwise generate and leave few records of their experiences and views in the form of diaries, letters, autobiographies. This data is often unique and irreplaceable, particularly in the case of prospective surveys, because survey data represents the details of life, experiences, feelings and views at a specific point in historical and biographical time; at a later date these may well be forgotten, redefined and re-evaluated. Data relating to a person can also be idiosyncratic, details that never become visible in a survey because surveys are not designed to give status to the unique, no matter how interesting, details become invisible.