

Long-term study reveals unique insights into how we change as we age

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In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the differences between generations and the sociological forces defining their worldviews and behavior. Stereotypes abound: the Silent Generation is inflexibly conventional, the boomers narcissistic, Gen X lazy. And millennials just take too long to grow up.

But few of these assumptions are grounded in sound sociological evidence. One of the few long-term studies that does closely examines at least one generation, Gen X, is the University of Alberta's Edmonton

Transitions Study (ETS).

Turning 35 this year, the ETS is the longest of its kind in Canada, shedding light on a number of life transitions from leaving high school to pursuing higher education, finding employment, starting a family, purchasing a home and advancing through a career.

The researchers first surveyed a group of almost 1,000 young Edmontonians in 1985 as they graduated from high school. Over the years, the group of respondents dwindled to about 400 as people drifted and were harder to find, but the cohort was surveyed four times between 18 and 25 to understand the complex transitions from education into the labor force, then again as they became young adults at age 32, again in 2010 when they were 43, and most recently in 2017 as they entered midlife (age 50) to study employment and family transitions.

The long-term study is a more scientific version of the Up film series, which checks in on the lives of 14 British children of different classes every seven years, since the age of seven in 1964. Starting with *Seven Up!*, the most recent in the series, *63 Up*, aired on the BBC last fall.

The myth of midlife crisis

The biggest international headlines generated by ETS appeared in 2015, when researchers released findings questioning the popular assumption of a "mid-life crisis"—that happiness declines from the teenage years into middle age before increasing again. Instead, ETS participants, on average, only got happier as they aged. The "glory days" were not in the late teens as many believed.

"When we followed them over time, yes, happiness increased up to age 32 and kind of leveled off by 43. But it didn't go down after that," said psychologist Nancy Galambos, who shared authorship on the study with

sociologist Harvey Krahn and human ecologist Matthew Johnson.

"I don't know if it was a surprise so much as nobody had done it," said Galambos, adding that economists had long assumed mid-life crisis was real, but had no longitudinal studies to back up their claims, relying instead on cross-sectional data of people at different ages studied at one point in time.

From two years to three decades

"A highlight of ETS is the ability to look at stability versus change, and how individuals change or grow over time and whether that matters for life outcomes like relationships, educational attainment, things like that, or if it's just a question of who you are at a given point in time," said Johnson.

The project was originally designed by Krahn and colleague Graham Lowe as a far less ambitious inquiry into job prospects facing Edmonton high-school graduates. Krahn had just started teaching at the U of A, and the study "fit in with my social justice concerns and the belief that inequality should be addressed and not ignored," he said.

Lowe and Krahn surveyed about 1,000 students, returning two years later to see how their lives had changed.

"We thought two years was a long study," said Krahn. "At the time, youth unemployment was higher than it had been since the Great Depression (peaking at over 19 percent in 1981-82), and a lot of people were wondering about the consequences of that at such a critical age."

The researchers wanted to know whether unemployment led to reduced self-esteem, depression, perhaps even criminal behavior.

"The biggest thing we learned was that many simply stayed in school because the jobs weren't out there," said Krahn.

The two returned to their cohort two years later looking for more answers, and the project's lifespan kept growing from there, eventually garnering support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Alberta government.

"When the subjects were 25 years old—seven years out—we were getting some interesting information about who had gone off to school and got degrees, who was in the labor force and so on," said Krahn.

Depression and self-esteem

In the early 2000s, Galambos joined the team from the University of Victoria. She'd done similar work on developmental psychology, accumulating longitudinal data on self-esteem and depression. That naturally led to questions of happiness and well-being over time.

In addition to her groundbreaking mid-life study, "Up Not Down," Galambos published an incisive paper called "Depression, Self-Esteem and Anger in Emerging Adulthood," concluding that common depressive symptoms and expressed anger declined between the ages of 18 and 25, while self-esteem increased.

Important influences on this trajectory were the level of parents' education—the more educated the parents, the faster depression and anger dissipated—and conflict with parents, which continued to fuel anger.

Women at 18 tended to be more depressed than men, but the gap narrowed by 25.

"Across time, increases in social support and marriage were associated with increased psychological well-being, whereas longer periods of unemployment were connected with higher depression and lower self-esteem," said Galambos.

The values of Gen X and Gen Z

More recently, in 2012, Krahn led an ETS study comparing the work beliefs and values of generations X and Y, finding that differences were not as pronounced as commonly thought.

"I have a fairly strong opinion about these beliefs that generations are so different," said Krahn. "Maybe it applies to people who grow up during very upsetting or very different times—the Depression or during the Second World War—but in general we're not convinced differences are that large" when it comes to core values.

However, differences do emerge when it comes to reaching some of life's major milestones. In a 2018 paper called "Quick, Uncertain, and Delayed Adults," Krahn and his colleagues demonstrated that among Generation X, transitioning into adult roles—getting their first full-time job, leaving home, leaving school, getting married, purchasing a house and having their first child—all took longer than it did for previous generations.

"What seems to be an underlying driver is how long you stay in school, which makes a lot of sense," said Krahn. "You delay marriage and the first job, but you get a better first job because you stay in school longer. The assumption in the popular media is that young people stay at home longer, not dealing with these transitions—suffering in their parents' basements and stunting their growth. But in reality, the people that are taking the longest are doing the best."

Biggest surprise

The most surprising results for Krahn came in a 2018 study showing that, over time, those with higher incomes grew less concerned with a range of social issues.

After surveying their initial cohort multiple times over 25 years, from ages 18 to 43, he found a decline in concern for five social problems—racial discrimination, treatment of Indigenous people, female job discrimination, unemployment and environmental pollution.

"There's just been a long standing chicken-and-egg question in sociology and political science: do people really get more conservative when they get older, or is it a generation or cohort effect? What was most interesting was whether higher education actually changes the trajectory," said Krahn. "We found that it didn't. But what did shape it was people's income—as your income rises, your concern for social issues declines."

What's next

At 35, the ETS shows no signs of slowing down. Other social scientists are asking for the collected data, and Margie Lachman—a psychologist from Brandeis University with expertise in lifespan development focusing on mid- and later life—has recently joined the team.

"I think each of us has at least one or two papers sketched out in our minds that we want to work on collectively," said Krahn.

Galambos plans to continue following Generation X into retirement, looking to see whether happiness holds up into old age. For Johnson, the big questions concern family relationships, reflected in his recent study

called "Stuck in the Middle With You: Predictors of Commitment in Midlife," and another finding that delaying marriage can make you happier in the long run.

"I want to look at family background, how your parents influence," said Johnson. "Things like demographics, immigration, parental education, relationships with parents—which of those is most influential on your life trajectory and for how long? Do you feel the influence of your parents all the way to age 50, or does that kind of peter out and your own life choices take over at a given point in time?"

Krahn is now retired, officially passing the project's reins to others on his team. But that doesn't mean his passion for research has at all diminished.

"I will continue with the research as long as I can," he said. "I love the data analysis, and I'm not just being nice to my colleagues, but we've got a pretty good team. So that certainly keeps me motivated."

As for his next study? "There's a big assumption out there—if I've heard it once I've heard it a dozen times—that the average person will have seven careers in their lifetime. How do we know that?"

"I'm pretty convinced we'll find that's a very stretched average."

More information: Edmonton Transitions Study:
edmontontransitionsstudy.weebly.com/

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