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Introducing ‘resonance’: Revisioning the relationship between youth and later life in women born 1939–52

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Abstract

This article proposes ‘resonance’ as a fruitful way of conceptualising the relationship between youth and later life and reflecting on its significance: resonance is how a person’s ‘youth’ is *lived with* in the present of their later life. Resonance revisions youth, engaging with the complexity of its presence in the lifecourse. Relinquishing a preoccupation with continuity and linearity, youth seen from the vantage point of later life contributes fresh insights into what matters for people and how. This conceptualisation emerged from a qualitative study of women born 1939–52 which revealed that experiences attributed to the teens and early twenties have a presence in a person’s later life in ways unrecognised in established approaches, namely longitudinal life-course studies and socio-cultural approaches. These resonances are often historically inflected such that some cohorts may live with their youth in later life in ways that distinguish them from their predecessors and successors.

Keywords

baby boomers, later life, lifecourse, postwar Britain, resonance, women, youth

Introduction

The topics of youth and ageing have received much attention, but often separately. The relationship between them has had relatively little scrutiny in general and, more specifically, with regard to the experiences of people who are now in later life. Yet youth

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is widely regarded in academic and popular discourse as significant for the acquisition of social, economic and cultural capital and for pathways into adulthood that have long-term consequences.¹ The relationship between the youth and later life of women who became young adults in 1960s Britain is also widely seen to be of particular interest for historically-specific reasons. Embracing 'war babies', postwar 'baby boomers' and what is often referred to as 'the '60s generation', this cohort are now part of the largest ever group of over-sixties in Britain (Biggs et al., 2007). They are heralded by social scientists as redefining ageing; and this pioneering approach to ageing is attributed partly to their youth experiences (e.g. Gilleard & Higgs, 2007). Especially in popular discourse, this cohort are also often portrayed in terms of privileges, a result of being the first cohort to benefit from the introduction of both the Education Act (1944) and the National Health Service (1948), and the relative affluence of the late 1950s and 1960s (e.g. Willetts, 2010). But in what ways might youth have implications for later life?

Two approaches dominate sociological research on the relationship between the youth and later life of those born in Britain mid-20th century. Utilising the 'life-course approach'² (cf. Giele & Elder, 1998), quantitatively-framed studies analyse associations between selected youth events and later-life conditions and experiences. Adopting a socio-cultural approach, and informed by 'social-generation' perspectives (cf. Mannheim, 1952; see Pilcher, 1995), studies of mainly postwar baby boomers address the cultural significance for later life of having been young in the 1960s. As this article demonstrates, the relationship between youth and later life is more rich, complex and nuanced than so far acknowledged for the cohort who were teenagers and young adults in the 1960s; this is also probably true for other cohorts. The sum of current research is empirically still sketchy, but the limitation goes further. The temporalities of the relationship between youth and later life are often conceived narrowly or assumed rather than interrogated and theorised. Life-course approaches are characterised by chronological linearity; youth remains firmly in the past. Socio-cultural approaches consider whether youth has laid the foundations for ways of thinking and being that are carried forward across a lifetime, but the temporal implications for thinking about later life remain vague.

We propose 'resonance' as a fruitful way of conceptualising the relationship between youth and later life and reflecting on its significance.³ Resonance is how a person's 'youth' is *lived with* in the present of their later life. It embraces the subjective, affective and embodied/sensory rather than external, objective markers of long-term effects and processes. Foregrounding the co-presence of youth and later life, resonance stands apart from dominant approaches to the relationship between youth and later life; it shifts attention from linear and causal accounts of this relationship, even if linearity is often key to how people perceive this. Resonance has implications for thinking about the lifecourse, youth and later life. While we limit ourselves to a discussion of how youth is lived with in later life because of the empirical foundations of our work, future research may illuminate the concept's wider potential for addressing how youth is lived with during other points in life.

In the following we introduce the concept of 'resonance' and its contribution to discussion of the lifecourse. We then outline our research and identification of different types of resonance: legacies, shadows, evaluations, continuities, silences. Using examples from our qualitative interviews with 70 women, we explain each kind of resonance,

highlighting historical dimensions. Individually and collectively, these examples illustrate the richness of the relationship between youth and later life, going beyond dominant approaches. Although we give only a glimpse of our empirical findings in this article, we demonstrate the value of resonance for understanding aspects of the later-life experiences of women born 1939–52. The final discussion returns to the significance of resonance for approaching this relationship, in general and for our cohort specifically. We argue that resonance is historically inflected such that the experiences of some cohorts may be distinguishing. Indeed, our research suggests that women born 1939–52 are living with their youth in distinctive ways in later life.

‘Resonance’ and the lifecourse

The relationship between youth and later life is typically the domain of lifecourse research, broadly defined as ‘the study of lives across age phases’ (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003, p. xii). In sociology, the ‘life-course approach’ is dominant, using mainly quantitative survey data (Bynner, 2016). The temporal principle of longitudinality is fundamental: ‘Only in this way is it possible to follow the impact of earlier events and feelings on later ones and the lagged effects of interaction with a given social or institutional milieu’ (Giele & Elder, 1998, p. 26). The relationship between youth and later life of those born in Britain mid-20th century is commonly approached in terms of shifts in social (im) mobilities, health, work–family patterns and increasingly retirement (e.g. Lacey et al., 2016; Scherger et al., 2016; Stafford et al., 2019; Xue et al., 2020, 2021). While quantitative studies suggest associations between youth and later life, they approach youth in terms only of a few predefined events and transitions and do not reveal whether and how these associations might be personally meaningful. Using sophisticated analyses, these studies investigate the long-term impacts of youth events, including impacts that are not unilinear or straightforwardly cumulative. However, the overarching preoccupation of these studies, and quantitative longitudinal research in general, is with chronological linearity and sequential life stages.

Sharing a focus on continuities, socio-cultural approaches provide a different perspective on the lifecourse of those born mid-20th century using quantitative and/or qualitative data. Engaging with ‘social-generation’ perspectives which posit the particular significance of historically-situated youth experiences (cf. Mannheim, 1952), they explore whether and how members of particular cohorts are distinctive in terms of orientations, worldview and habitus that are carried forward throughout their lives with implications for identities, practices and lifestyles (e.g. Edmunds & Turner, 2002; Eyerman & Turner, 1998; Gilleard & Higgs, 2005; Vincent, 2005; Weisner & Bernheimer, 1998). The implications of youth experiences for later life are increasingly in focus in Britain and beyond, driven by a need to better understand baby boomers (e.g. Tunney et al., 2022). Studies of ageing British boomers explore whether people who were young in the 1960s have retained a ‘youthful’ approach to culture (Huber & Skidmore, 2003) and consumption (Biggs et al., 2007; Gilleard & Higgs, 2007; Higgs et al., 2009).

Introducing ‘resonance’, this article offers a different perspective on the lifecourse. Resonance is how one’s youth is *lived with* in the present of later life: that is, how aspects of youth seemingly create ripples across biographical and historical time that

are reconstructed, animated, experienced, felt, interpreted, imagined and mobilised in the present. Engaging with varied ways that a person's youth matters to them in later life brings into view more diverse experiences and temporalities than addressed in life-course or socio-cultural approaches. These experiences and temporalities are sometimes addressed in qualitative life-course research – narrative and biographical approaches (e.g. Hollstein, 2019), qualitative engagements with longitudinal surveys (Carpentieri & Elliott, 2014; Cruz et al., 2022; Elliott, 2008; Tinkler et al., 2021a), longitudinal studies that follow subjects as their lives unfold (see Neale, 2021) – although these do not scrutinise the relationship between youth and later life in general, or for our cohort specifically.

Resonance has multiple registers, including meanings, feelings, assessments, identifications, imaginings, that is the subjective, affective and embodied/sensory. It embraces memory in its diverse forms: its construction and narrativisation (Summerfield, 2004); affective and sensory 'encounters' that are experienced as if through 'time travelling' rather than recall (Mason, 2018, pp. 40, 192); 'encoded' institutional experiences carried forward in time, part of the 'historicality of the individual' (Abbott, 2005); and 'enduring', embodied experiences that 'are not what a body has lived through but what a body is living (through) as non-linear durations' (Coleman, 2008, p. 93). From middle-age, people have a disproportionate number of memories relating to youth (Schuman & Scott, 1989); resonance is possibly influenced by this, but is not synonymous with, or determined by, extent of recall. Resonance does not include the objective identification of youth events/transitions and their association with later-life outcomes, but it does include accounts of the meaning and possible significance of these in later life; accounts often informed by normative ideals and vernacular social science regarding 'the self', 'identity', personal relationships, 'development', 'youth' and much more (Mandler, 2019).

Traces of youth are not necessarily fixed, but mutable, shaped by different historical and biographical contexts. Resonances may have an ongoing presence across a person's lifecourse. They can also be discontinuous – intermittent – the result of threads that dip below the surface of consciousness for parts of a person's life and resurface at a later date in new contexts, sometimes expressed in unexpected ways. In some instances, resonances first emerge many years after the experiences they seemingly relate to, jolted into being by historical change and biographical occasions. While resonances may relate to specific events in youth, others may be amorphous and shaped by a cluster of experiences since then, including imaginings of youth informed by popular culture (Thomson, 1994). Like Mason's (2018, p. 190) 'affinities' – 'potent connections' that matter in some way – resonances can seemingly be anchored in a particular historical era or manifest as fleeting moments of 'association, realisation, . . . discordance and connection'. Whichever way traces of the past emerge in a person's later life, they are inextricably bound up with their present; they are not self-contained residues of the past, hermetically sealed, and separate from current life.

The temporalities of resonance are more diverse than in dominant approaches to the lifecourse. Causality, continuity and direct connections are not preoccupations. Biographical continuity cannot be assumed; we need also to engage with discontinuity (Day, 2007). Recent qualitative research on later life critiques a fixation on linearity, opening up empirical and theoretical engagement with the complex significance of the

past. The past emerges as very much part of present life with regard to older people's senses of belonging, how they understand and experience themselves and their surroundings, and how they talk and approach ageing (Carpentieri & Elliott, 2014; Degnen, 2012; May, 2017, 2018). To date, youth has not been an explicit focus of this scholarship. Researching the resonances of women born 1939–52, we build on these studies to explore the particular significance of youth in later life and the imprint of history.

Resonance is historically inflected such that the experiences of some cohorts may well be distinguishing. This is not to conflate resonance with social generation; resonance embraces social-generational effects but also historical distinctiveness that emerges in other ways. Moreover, the historical specificity of many youth resonances is not always, or solely, attributable to the historical period of youth; sometimes, the historical context of later life may be equally, if not more, significant. Engaging with historical specificity can, as in our research, highlight the gendered features of some types of resonance and explain them. Gender has not been a prominent theme in socio-cultural approaches to the youth and later life of ageing British boomers, although there is evidence of gendered social-generational experiences and practices (e.g. Edmunds & Turner, 2002; Pilcher, 1998). However, the salience of gender in the lifecourse for women in Britain mid-20th century is firmly established in quantitative longitudinal studies which reveal gendered trajectories relating to key youth events (education, employment, marriage, motherhood), some tracing associations with socio-economic conditions, health and life-satisfaction measures in later life (e.g. Joshi & Hinde, 1993; Lacey et al., 2016; McMunn et al., 2006, 2015; Xue et al., 2020, 2021). The study of resonance offers different insights into the salience of gender in the lifecourse. Exploring personal experiences in later life, it reveals diverse ways in which gendered youth experiences matter, including for how an older person thinks and feels about the conditions of their current life, the person they are, and the life they might have led.

Resonance revisions youth, engaging with the complexity of its presence in the lifecourse. In the 1990s, revisionist approaches to the sociology of childhood challenged the representation of this period of life simply in terms of *becoming*, that is a future orientation. *Being* young was placed firmly on the agenda and childhood studies have since been as much about the present as the future (Uprichard, 2008). The twin orientations of being and becoming were more firmly rooted in youth studies, arising from the preoccupation with both youth cultural life and youth transitions. What remains undeveloped, however, is attention to childhood and youth in terms of what has *been*, that is, a past orientation. There have been attempts to embrace 'having been' as part of the experience of childhood (Cross, 2011; Kingdon, 2018) and to explore how adults remember and narrate their childhoods (Brannen, 2004). In youth studies, Wood (2017, p. 1183) critiques a preoccupation with 'linear, normative and teleological conceptions of time' and, building on Ingold (2007), outlines ways to engage with the temporal complexities of youth. The recent, but contested, popularity of social-generational perspectives in youth studies (France & Roberts, 2015; Woodman & Wyn, 2015) also opens up the possibility of tracing different youth temporalities. Nevertheless, none of these studies grapples conceptually and empirically with youth as a presence in the later decades of a person's life. The study of resonance exposes for scrutiny this co-presence.

Methods

Our conceptualisation of resonance emerged from analysis of qualitative interview data generated from the *Girlhood and Later Life Project*. This project had two aims. The first was to investigate key experiences and transitions to adulthood of young women from different social backgrounds in Britain 1954–76. Youth was defined as 15 to 24 years, bridging the end of compulsory full-time education and the age by which most young women married. The second aim was to explore the relationship between the youth of these women and their later-life experiences and identities in the 21st century.

The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) provided the backbone of our study. It is a nationally representative sample of people aged 50(+) years living in private households in England that started in 2002–3. We analysed data relating to women born 1939–52, including retrospectively-generated data about their youth 1954–76 (collected via a life-history interview in 2006) and data on later life (collected biennially). We started with quantitative analysis of ELSA and, using sequence analysis, generated contextual description of the prevalence and timing of key youth events/transitions relating to education, work, partnership and parenthood between the ages of 14 and 26 as well as the social-class patterning of these differences (Xue et al., 2020). From this we identified a stratified sample of women born 1939–52 who had experienced different patterns of events/transition in their youth and recruited 70 women for interview.⁴ While the ELSA study is based on a probability sample, our sub-sample of interviewees were not randomly selected from the ELSA sample. Rather we used a quota sampling approach to ensure adequate representation of a diverse range of work and family circumstances, as well as diversity in childhood socio-economic circumstances and educational attainment. While the results from our interview sample are not necessarily quantitatively representative of all women living in England, they represent a diverse range of women's experiences in this cohort. However, experiences specific to minority groups in England (Webster, 1998) are only glimpsed. ELSA does not reflect ethnic diversity because the cohort of people living in England born between 1939 and 1952 were not very ethnically diverse. Our interview sample included an Irish and a Cypriot woman, both girlhood immigrants; apart from the Cypriot, all interviewees were white. Our sample included women who grew up in urban and rural localities in England, Wales and Scotland.

From 2018 until early 2020 we conducted two qualitative interviews with each participant on their youth and later life. These interviews were interspersed with three creative elicitation techniques designed to encourage participants to remember their pasts from diverse vantage points. Through this combination of techniques, we sought to explore, but also go beyond, well-rehearsed narratives about youth and later life. The two interviews and elicitation exercises took place across a day, typically lasting around five hours in total. The blend of interview and elicitation methods proved successful in generating rich data and in maintaining the engagement of our participants, almost all of whom reported enjoying the experience.

Two experienced interviewers, both midlife, conducted the qualitative research: Laura Fenton is a white woman, who was raised in Canada, and Resto Cruz is a Filipino man. The interviews followed the ethos of a 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984): that is, an intersubjective exchange of ideas with the goal of eliciting accounts of the past

and reflections on them. Both researchers listened carefully to interviewees' accounts, and based their line of questioning on these, as well as on the loosely structured interview guide.

In advance of the interview, participants were asked to identify music that they associated with their youth and which they listened to at the time. At the beginning of the first interview we played these music choices and explored the moments that they brought to mind. Although music is recognised for its associations with feelings, experience and memories, music elicitation is still a relatively untapped resource in sociological enquiry (Allett, 2010; Pickering & Keightley, 2015). For our research, music-elicitation was useful in that the link to an evocative youth memory helped anchor the interview in the historical/biographical period we were exploring. The music focused the interviewee on something specific and meaningful from their youth, from which our questions could radiate. It also helped identify youth experiences that may not otherwise have been highlighted.

After the youth interview we worked with participants to create a 'Biographical Map' (Tinkler et al., 2021b). This novel elicitation exercise involved the creation of a visual representation of the spaces and mobilities of youth that were meaningful for our participants. Leading into the later-life interview, we introduced a 'Then and Now' exercise. In advance of meeting us, we asked participants to identify two photos, one from their youth and one taken recently, and to prepare a couple of sentences to address the following: 'Thinking about yourself as the girl or young woman in the first photo, what did you think life held in store for you. And, thinking about yourself now, what would you tell your younger self about how your life turned out?' Although experiences in the time between youth and later life were important, the photos helped keep these two biographical/historical moments to the fore for interviewee and researcher. This exercise served as a springboard for the exploration of participants' perceptions of the implications of youth experiences for their lifecourse and later-life identities and experiences.

Interviews were transcribed and then read by the interviewer and principal investigator (Penny Tinkler) alongside fieldnotes, written summaries and biographical maps. Each participant was approached as a 'case study'. Cases were then discussed comparatively, pursuing sociological and historical lines of enquiry and explanation for the homogeneity and diversity observed. Reviewing our first 12 cases, we noted the relevance of youth experiences in later life. This was not simply a product of the interview. Youth experiences existed beyond this; they influenced, coloured, informed and were felt in the present, i.e. they were *lived with* in later life. Traces of youth were acknowledged explicitly by interviewees in their descriptions and interpretations, but also revealed in asides and uncontextualised comments about their youth that we were sensitised to because we had engaged with them at length about their girlhood and growing up. The term 'resonance' best expressed for us these manifestations of youth and in subsequent interviews we paid closer attention to them. Resonances were, however, diverse in form and for purposes of identification and analysis we distinguished five main types, although remaining open to outliers. We subsequently traced and analysed examples of the different resonances across our 70 case studies.⁵ Our method enabled the identification and exploration of diverse and subtle ways in which girlhood experiences continued to have a presence in later life.

Living with youth in later life

Our interviewees typically live with their youth in multiple ways; that is, most experience different sorts of resonance. Drawing on examples from our research, we introduce five types of resonance: legacies, shadows, evaluations, continuities and silence.⁶ Distinguishing between them is analytically constructive. While resonances can flow into one another, they can also work in contradictory ways, like a rip current. Being sensitive to different types enables us to explore and explain how resonances are experienced in later life. It affords appreciation, and analysis, of the richness and complexity of the relationship between youth and later life, going beyond dominant approaches, discussed earlier, which focus on particular aspects of experience and on linearity and continuity across the lifecourse. It also enables investigation of whether, and how, different kinds of resonance are historically-inflected. In the following we consider each type of resonance in turn, noting intersections and tensions between them and highlighting historical dimensions. We glimpse some of the gender characteristics of our interviewees' experiences of resonance, although there is not scope here to pursue this. Legacies and shadows receive greater attention because of their importance in our study for demonstrating historical distinctiveness and the utility of resonance; we return to these points in the discussion.

Legacies

Most interviewees identified legacies of their youth that explain from their perspective how their lives panned out, leading to their current situation in later life. Legacies explain what is – that is, participants' perceptions of what has led to their present positions or statuses – such as socio-economic conditions, marital status, health. They are attributed to positive and negative changes during youth, including long-standing difficulties. Positive ongoing features of youth were rarely identified as legacies, possibly because their continuity was presumed; it is disruption that becomes notable. Legacies could be idiosyncratic, but there were also common ones, indicative of shared experiences of growing up postwar. Importantly, common, including cross-class, legacies often related to diverse later-life conditions such as standard of living, and, as discussed shortly, they related to other kinds of resonance in multiple ways.

Legacies were often traced to 'critical moments' (Thomson, 2002) – events perceived by the subject to have had important consequences for their lives and identities. 'Critical moments' were usually identified early in the interview when we asked about significant youth experiences and were revisited when interviewees later reflected on whether their lives turned out as they had expected; often these moments were the focus of advice to their younger self. Frequently cited legacies included uninspired or erroneous careers advice, or being prevented from staying on at school. Women from across the social-class spectrum also presented 'early marriage' as a legacy that resonated in later life. Even those who received further and higher education were typically married by their mid-twenties if not before. The significance of marriage was usually that it ended the relative freedoms of youth, not least because most quickly became mothers; for some, pregnancy was the impetus to marry. Legacies were also often traced to having children 'prematurely', conceived in or out of wedlock. The pill was available to married women

from 1961, but most single women had restricted access to reliable contraception until the 1970s and no safe and legal means to terminate a pregnancy until 1967 at the earliest.

Sally (b. 1948) has experienced some social mobility across her lifetime. Her living conditions are better than those she grew up in; she was one of 10 children in an impoverished family. Nevertheless, aged 70, Sally still has very little money, her health is poor and she is disabled. Sally lives with her second husband in a council house on the same estate where she had lived with her first husband in the 1970s. For Sally, the legacy of her youth is becoming a teenage mum at 19 and the mother of two by 21. In the interview she repeatedly describes being a reluctant mother: 'They [her 2 children] were both mistakes.' Sally attributes the ongoing hardship and disadvantage in her life to this and talks at length about her inability to buy a house, unlike many of her contemporaries.

Had we had the children a bit later we might well have been able to save up . . . Because in those days you could get 100% deposit, well 99% mortgage . . . but then well I fell pregnant we knew that was just a waste of time, because there was no way one wage was going to do it on its own . . . not and pay a rent.

Legacies could become apparent at different points in life: 'It wasn't until I split up with my husband that I realised how much mistakes I'd made.' Because of child care, Sally could only work part-time for many years. The 'trap' of casual work was only appreciated later in adulthood when Sally discovered that she had insufficient National Insurance contributions for a decent pension: 'So, when I came to retire, I've got those years that no tax and insurance was ever paid on me – and I'm paying for it now.'

Parental control over girls' options is another legacy mentioned by women from diverse backgrounds. Audrey's (b. 1947) legacy relates to a lifetime of low earning potential and opportunities that she attributes to her mother's dominance and interference, and to a 'critical moment' when she was 15. Audrey grew up in a Northern English working-class family. Reflecting on the most important events in her youth, Audrey started with a story about her first job:

In my life, [sighs] right, well I left school at 15 and wanted to be a dressmaker, so much wanted to do dressmaking, I loved sewing . . . And I went to the big shop in [my hometown] and got myself an apprenticeship and I went home so excited to tell me mum that I'd got an apprenticeship and my mum said, 'hard luck you start at [a local company] on Monday'.

Audrey later elaborated on the story, revealing its continued importance. This incident was initially experienced as devastating, but subsequently as a debilitating legacy:

. . . she stopped me from when I had my children of earning a living from my own home, I could have done dressmaking from home, I could have rented a little shop, I could have done anything and I lost all that. Because what I did [at the company] didn't leave me anything . . . I wasn't properly trained at anything and that is the upsetting part really.

Audrey is clear about the legacy of her mother's dominance, but her interpretation of its genesis has changed. Her recent experience of caring for her husband, who suffers from

dementia, has led her to reinterpret her mother's demanding nature, as her mother had been a carer during Audrey's youth. This does not, however, lessen the emotional intensity of her youth experience: the enduring feeling of being thwarted and deflated by her mother's interventions.

Legacies could be complex. Judy (b. 1948) currently enjoys a comfortable lower-middle-class standard of living. Raised in extreme poverty in London, and with modest ambitions of marriage, motherhood and a 'better quality of life', Judy describes being fulfilled through family life and proud of her achievements:

I got everything. I got the man I wanted. I had two lovely boys, which are the best things ever. I've got a lovely home.

Judy's legacies were securing a good job as a telephonist at 16, and at 18, meeting her future husband. Driven by their desire for social mobility, the couple postponed marriage until Judy was 22 and saved for a house. They delayed having children until she was 27, at which point Judy stopped full-time work. The combination of her partnership and employment enabled Judy to exceed her modest aspirations.

Judy describes having 'no regrets', but there is tension in her account: the suggestion of an alternative, but undeveloped, legacy from her youth. Judy thrived at secondary school and was transferred at 13 into its grammar stream, but when her mother became terminally ill, Judy left school at 15 to help at home. Judy wistfully recalls that the head teacher thought Judy could have become a teacher if she had stayed on at school: 'I would have loved to have taught.' The prospect is dismissed with recourse to fatalism: 'I wish I'd gone on and completed my studies but life has different things for you.' Judy chooses not to explain her life in terms of a legacy of missed opportunity, but tension remains: it is the source of a faint shadow – Judy's ongoing wish to have been a teacher. The wish is suppressed, but its potency is manifest in Judy's investments in the education of her children, and in her taste in music which is traced to the head teacher who recognised Judy's career potential:

. . . [at school] they would play elements of classical music . . . I love classical music now . . . I've always got the radio on to classical because it just reminds me.

Thus, legacies refer to specific conditions or occurrences in youth that participants drew on to explain aspects of their current situation (however they see it). However, as Judy's wish suggests, people can also live with their youth in other ways in later life.

Shadows

Interviewees frequently described fleeting imaginings of alternative possibilities, but well-defined shadows were also commonplace. Shadows are the realm of possibility: the terrain of the imagination, dreams, desires, aspirations and regrets. Oral historian Allesandro Portelli (1991, p. 100) borrowed the term 'uchronic' from science fiction to refer to 'not how history went, but how it *could*, or *should* have gone, focusing on *possibility* rather than actuality', 'glimpses of favoured alternatives' in interviewees'

narratives. Personal histories also have uchronic features. David Vincent (1997, p. 98) identified unrealised, but conceivable, ‘shadow careers’ in life histories: ‘occupations which were never found, . . . work histories which never took place’. Anthropologist Andrew Irving (2018, p. 390) focuses on the ‘imagined lives that a person . . . might otherwise have lived’ and their everyday impact (see also Phillips, 2013).

Shadows were often significant because they related to the kind of person our interviewees could have been, what we call a ‘shadow-self’. That interviewees articulated shadows in terms of selfhood is related to having grown up post-1950. They became young adults at a time when the ‘project of the self’, accompanied by ‘accelerated processes of self-reflexivity’, was becoming established in everyday life and popular discourse (Conekin et al., 1999, p. 10), including in the school curriculum (Steedman, 1999). By 2018, when our interviews began, self-realisation and self-fulfilment were widely regarded as important life objectives. They were also employed for evaluative purposes, including in life-satisfaction and wellbeing measures used in ELSA questionnaires which our interviewees completed. Framing shadows in terms of selfhood was sometimes potent for our interviewees because they perceived themselves to be incomplete.

Sam (b. 1948) has a shadow-self related to work. Sam grew up in an upper-working-class family. She started work at 16, met her future husband, Harry, at 17 and married shortly after, becoming a full-time housewife and mother by age 20. Sam’s family orientation was not the result of choice but of limited options. Her shadow-self flourished due to the compounding effects of two legacies that she identifies relating to a thwarted education and an early marriage: shadows can usually be related to legacies, but not all negative legacies spawn shadows. Although Sam was often top of her B-stream class, she was prevented from taking qualifications required to pursue a career in technical drawing. Leaving school at 15, and following a year-long secretarial course, Sam entered office work. Although Sam enjoyed paid work, once married she was unable to secure a job because employers assumed she would leave to start a family: in response, she did just that. In her early twenties Sam acquired further qualifications at evening school to prove to herself that she was academically capable, but it was too late for her to capitalise on these in terms of career.

Sam feels impoverished as a result of her youth experiences, especially in terms of her sense of self, and conjures a shadow-self that is confident and self-assured. Sam believes that a career would have given her confidence and space for self-realisation:

I look at my friends who’ve had careers and they’ve developed . . . confidence, being able to form opinions . . . I was quite mature for a child, but I don’t feel I’ve developed beyond that, from my teenaged years. [. . .] I don’t feel I’ve found the inner me; the inner me hasn’t been allowed to develop.

An important subtext in Sam’s account is that her youth experiences prevent her from asserting herself in her relationship with her husband: ‘I have never felt as though we are equal. That’s the only disappointment I have in life, I think. That I’m not treated as an equal.’ Several times in the interviews, Sam reiterated the importance of respect in relationships – undoubtedly a coded reference to her relationship with Harry – and suggested

that this followed from people's levels of self-confidence and self-realisation. The terminology Sam used suggests that her 'shadow-self' gained distinction as she absorbed feminist ideas about women's rights and gender equality in marriage that have circulated widely in popular discourse since the 1970s.

I've not stood up to Harry. If I'd been more assertive, then maybe he would have respected me more and he would have taken on board that I have equal rights within the partnership.

Her husband once suggested she should do an assertiveness training course, and she thought 'Your life would be a lot different if I did! [laughs]'.

The prevalence and characteristics of shadow-selves are typically the product of a specific configuration of history and biography. In his analysis of work histories 1900–1930s, Vincent (1997) found that a historically-specific disjuncture between expanding education and employment opportunities and constricting resources created shadow careers on an unprecedented scale. In our study, we too note that education and careers feature prominently in shadow-selves due partly to a historically-specific disjuncture for girls between perceptions of possibilities and actual experiences. The 1950s and 1960s are notable for optimism about the transformative potential of education (Mandler, 2016), expanding employment opportunities for women and encouragement of education and career ambitions in some girls' grammar schools (Abrams, 2013). Nevertheless, most working-class girls (O'Connor & Goodwin, 2004) and many grammar schoolgirls (Todd, 2019, pp. 46–47) were not encouraged or enabled to exploit education opportunities and were channelled into a narrow range of jobs. As in Sam's case, such experiences laid the foundations for career-related shadows in later life. In our study there were also shadows relating to sexual experience and travel. Their discovery is partly because of our openness to them, but they are mainly testimony to shifting expectations about personal fulfilment and the significance of sexual experience (Charnock, 2020) and travel (Tinkler, 2021) in the project of the self.

Sophie's (b. 1949) account reveals a multifaceted shadow-self. Sophie lives comfortably with her husband, a retired lawyer. Her marriage is identified as a key legacy of her middle-class youth. Sophie does not see her youth carrying forward into her married life: 'My life is really in two parts, before marriage . . . after marriage . . . My life changed completely.' Nevertheless, Sophie has a shadow-self that can be traced to youth in two ways. First, to Sophie's unfulfilled ambition.

The one thing I always wanted to do, and if I live my life again I would do, and that is become an architect.

Sophie's shadow career gained substance over time because she believes it was realisable if she had been encouraged academically or been born slightly later: 'Work harder', she advised her younger self, 'I could have become an architect!' Typical of middle-class women in our study, Sophie's class-related resources enabled her to find an alternative outlet for this aspect of her shadow-self thus lessening the intensity of its resonance in later life. This outlet was a successful business in housing that Sophie started in her thirties.

There is also a hint of a second shadow relating to sex. Sophie met her husband when she was 21 in 1970, and married him two years later; he is her first and only sexual partner. Sophie was unconcerned about sexual inexperience in her youth but her views have since changed:

I just knew when I met him that that was the one. And it probably wasn't a mistake. [Laughs] It's been the right marriage. Sex, I don't know.

Sophie hints at feeling sexually unfulfilled, and later declares: 'I regret I didn't have sex earlier.' Sexual mores were changing in the late 1960s, but pre-marital sex was practised mainly by couples who intended to marry, partly because of fear of pregnancy (Cook, 2005, p. 122). However, by the 1980s, aided by accessible contraception, it had become increasingly acceptable, and even expected, that women should have a range of pre-marital sexual experience; indeed, this was established as an element of self-discovery, fulfilment and self-realisation. As another interviewee bluntly stated, sexual inexperience inhibited her becoming a 'fully rounded human being'. Several married women suggested this, but like Sophie, the shadow around sex is not one they feel they can address.

As in Sophie's account, shadow-selves often gain or lose definition over time. Interviewees did not always perceive possibilities in their youth; they often emerged in adulthood, the significance compounded by the expansion of prospects for younger generations of women (Vincent, 1997). Shadows could also fade. This was common regarding travel shadows as many of our interviewees benefited from affordable overseas travel since the 1980s and from the freedoms and relative affluence that often characterise early retirement (Biggs et al., 2007).

Evaluations

Appraising their youth, many fondly describe being 'a teenager', even if poverty restricted their options. Such evaluations are another kind of resonance. They are normative assessments of youth in the life lived, shaped by institutional experiences and popular discourse, and revealed when people reflect on whether their younger days fulfilled historically-specific expectations of what youth *should* entail for a person such as themselves (however they see this), and how it should prepare them for life. Significantly for our cohort, their teens and early twenties occurred when expectations of youth as a particular quality of experience expanded and became more defined (Tinkler, 2014; Todd, 2019, pp. 46–47), but the freedoms, lifestyle and opportunities for self-realisation that were increasingly associated with youth were sometimes elusive for women and typically short-lived. Several interviewees thought they had lost out on youth because of overly strict parents and the limitations of living in rural communities without recourse to personal transport. Early marriage or motherhood were also frequently portrayed as curtailing youth. Blaming both her strict parents and her tendency to 'drift', Colleen (b. 1944) laments that she 'missed out on youth': her experience falls short of what she now idealises as the standard of the time. Daisy (b. 1947) sees her youth differently. Whilst a schoolgirl, Daisy's options were curtailed by living in a village, but once working

full-time in a nearby town and able to drive, she embraced opportunities to socialise and have sex with men. Daisy's sexual encounters were sometimes 'scary' (Fenton & Tinkler, forthcoming), but she proudly asserts that she exploited youth opportunities for independence and sexual freedom.

Continuities

Continuities are another sort of resonance, although often entangled with legacies and shadows. They take many forms and are the contributions of youth to the kind of person someone is in later life, particularly in terms of identities, attitudes, practices, interests and feelings. These often draw explicitly or implicitly on popular psychological and sociological theories (Mandler, 2019), although few perceived themselves as a 'generation' – a point deserving more attention than possible here. Some interviewees described embodied experiences of what they had 'inherited' and 'absorbed' through their upbringing; this typically bore the hallmarks of class, place and period. Prudence and industry were continuities, often attributed to postwar austerity and the experience of managing hardship when young, that have become habitual. Alex's (b. 1950) mum had four young children when she was suddenly widowed. Growing up amidst hardship, Alex realised that 'the only way we could see we were going to get anything in life is by working for it'; this remains deeply ingrained. Continuities were often experienced as embodied affects and 'enduring' orientations (Coleman, 2008). Frances (b. 1950) repeatedly described how, since her teens, painting has been integral to her sense of self, although often side-lined in the service of her family; now retired, she explains, painting is 'what I need to do to carry on through later life . . . a bit of self-preservation'. There are also specific experiences that seemingly 'bleed through' the decades (Degnen, 2012, p. 14). Recall Audrey's visceral feelings about her mother's interference in her career prospects.

Continuities are also manifest in narrative, what we call 'biographical motifs'. These are shorthand accounts of oneself that a person has developed or adopted (sometimes based on how other people have defined them) that can be traced back to youth; these motifs are consolidated and refined over decades. These are youth-related versions of the distinctive narrative repertoires of older people identified by Catherin Degnen (2012, pp. 4, 8): a form of 'condensed memory, perfected through oft-repeated performance', that individuals employ to say 'this is me'. Megan (b. 1950) repeatedly describes herself as a 'muggins', meaning naïve and easily exploited. She recounts numerous episodes in which she accepted unfair treatment at home, school and later by her mother-in-law. In contrast, Jade (b. 1952) mobilises a motif around her entrepreneurial spirit and success in getting things done. Biographical motifs often provide narrative coherence and the foundation stones in 'small stories' (Carpentieri & Elliott, 2014) that people craft to account for their experiences of growing up and ageing.

Silences

Inspired by Susie Scott's (2018) study of nothingness, silence is another type of resonance. Silences are the palpable absences relating to youth. They leave traces but these

can be difficult to pinpoint and we identified only a few instances in our study. Silences can result from traumatic youth experiences that are blocked, or from difficulty in composing and narrating memories, perhaps arising from an unwillingness to engage with the past or from the disjuncture between experience and dominant ideals or expectations (Day, 2007; Summerfield, 2004). Occasionally there were historical dimensions to what could be comfortably conceived and spoken about. Discursive shifts around the time of our interviews enabled us to discern what was previously secret, as when Sophie, discussed earlier, disclosed her father's homosexuality: 'Not many people know, so I thought you could see me hesitating before I said anything. So, my husband knows. My best friend now knows, and I've never told my children.'

Sophie is typical of our interviewees in that her youth resonates in later life in multiple ways. Rarely, interviewees gave no indication that they currently live with aspects of their youth. This absence of resonance is distinct from silence and seems to arise when youth is profoundly unimportant for what an interviewee currently thinks and feels about themselves and their lifecourse.

Discussion and conclusion

Resonance provides a new framework for conceptualising the relationship between youth and later life, foregrounding co-presence in the lifecourse. Our in-depth research with women born 1939–52 reveals that experiences attributed to the teens and early twenties have a presence in a person's later life in ways unrecognised in dominant approaches to the lifecourse. Analysing women's accounts, we reveal the diverse characteristics of resonance, including its registers (subjective, affective, embodied/sensory), temporalities (ongoing, threaded, newly emergent) and types – legacies, shadows, evaluations, continuities and silences. Distinguishing between types is a heuristic device; in practice, as our examples indicate, resonances can be entangled (e.g. Audrey's legacy and continuities), fluid (e.g. Sophie's shadows), and sometimes in tension (e.g. Judy's legacy and faint shadow). Noting how persons experience different kinds of resonance, we avoid caricaturing 'youth' as a presence in later life, thereby appreciating 'singularities' alongside commonalities (cf. Lahire, 2008, pp. 168–171).

Engaging with the presence of youth in later life, resonance advances exploration of the hitherto neglected dimension of youth as 'has been'. Fifty years removed from the teens and early twenties, we see the perceived later-life significance of youth transitions, youth cultural life and social-generational effects, gaining a novel perspective on debates in youth studies about the merits of different approaches (France & Roberts, 2015). Relinquishing a preoccupation with continuity and linearity, youth seen from the vantage point of later life offers fresh insights into what matters and how, including the 'what ifs' that constitute shadows. In our research, socio-economic factors often stand out as legacies for women who remain disadvantaged in later life, but for many women, including the privileged, youth resonates because of its significance for an 'authentic' selfhood and personal fulfilment and is manifest in shadow-selves. In terms of evaluations, a 'youth cultural experience' is often valued, especially by those who feel they missed out on one. For this generation, and possibly subsequent ones that have grown up with the expectation of youth as a particular quality of experience – characterised by relative freedom, opportunity and adventure – the absence can resonate strongly in later life.

Resonance is part of the richness of personhood and personal lives that has, until recently, been largely overlooked within sociology (Mason, 2018). Our cohort of women appear as they have never been seen before, although we can give only a flavour of this here. Viewing later life through this lens, persons emerge not as occupying a singular temporal plane – the present – as they move forward in historical/biographical time. Instead, persons and the experience of living emerge as constituted by temporal complexity. To appreciate the relationship between youth and later life we need to embrace co-presence and engage with discontinuity (Day, 2007) alongside continuity. It is not always that ‘youth *still* matters’ in an ongoing way extending into later life, but quite simply that ‘youth matters’ in later life.

Resonance is historically inflected such that the experiences of some cohorts may well be distinguishing, that is, they will live with their youth in later life in historically-distinctive ways. As discussed earlier, this is not to conflate resonance with evidence of social generation. Comparative work is beyond the scope of this discussion, but our research suggests that in England, women born 1939–52 are living with their youth in ways that differ from that of women who were born 1919–39 and who became 60 in the late 20th century, and which will be distinctive from the experiences of women from subsequent cohorts. Further research on women from minority groups may reveal additional dimensions to this. The conditions of youth are important for understanding historical distinctiveness, which is not to assume continuity or linearity between the experiences of youth and later life. Individual women’s experiences of even widely shared resonances may differ in their temporalities: some are continuous from youth, but not all; and not everyone who experienced commonplace conditions in youth will have later-life resonances relating to them. Historical context delineates the scope of possibilities in youth, and later-life engagements with, and interpretations of, them.

It is striking how often our interviewees cited similar legacies of youth, particularly skewed or thwarted education and career prospects, also premature marriage and motherhood. For many, these legacies spawned shadows including shadow-selves. These relate to our interviewees having ‘transitional experiences’; they matured in the early years of a period of change for women regarding education, careers and gender relations. During their youth or shortly after, they often became aware of the disjuncture between possibilities and actual experiences in youth relating to education, careers, sex and travel. The cross-class trend towards early marriage (Dyhouse, 2006, p. 92) was significant for many. Even those who initially benefited from expanding opportunities typically had their prospects derailed, leading to disrupted or truncated careers or less-favoured options. The significance of limited options in youth was often compounded over time as prospects for women improved (as in Vincent, 1997). These resonances are distinctive to our cohort. Legacies and shadows relating to education, careers and early marriage/motherhood will likely distinguish them from their mother’s cohort, because the latter’s experiences of resonance would have different youth materials at their core. Shadows around sex distinguish our cohort from both their predecessors and successors, the latter benefiting from accessible and reliable contraception. The existence of shadow-*selves* also marks our cohort of women as different from previous ones: informed by postwar discourses on self-fulfilment, enhanced since the 1970s by feminist discourse on women’s entitlements, many of our interviewees lived with shadow-selves in later life.

Our interviewees' resonances bear the hallmarks of youth experienced by girls in Britain in the 1950s–1970s, but are not reducible to this because they are also outcomes of later life in the present. They were at an age where they could take stock; the last two decades had been periods of reflection for many. With the exception of chronically-ill and disabled women, our interviewees were physically active and engaged in family and community networks. Most anticipated years of fairly active life, although aware that this depended on good health, which could not be taken for granted; typically, they were experiencing later life differently to their mothers and characteristic of the redefinition of ageing in late-modernity (Biggs et al., 2007). In this context, they often had a heightened sense of what was possible in their teens/twenties, and of the likely outcomes of this for adult life. Currently, and looking to the future, while some accept that they cannot rectify the omissions of their youth (e.g. sexual inexperience), later life is also perceived as an opportunity to address other youth experiences that had previously cast shadows (e.g. travel) and in doing so dissipate them. Others grasp opportunities to tackle what they have missed out on but nevertheless feel that they have gone through life as 'a shadow of their true self'. Shifting priorities are diminishing some shadows. As one woman with failing health commented, 'this used to bother me, but less so now'.

Researching resonance reveals the presence, and often the potency, of youth beyond a person's early decades. As our examples illustrate, resonances colour how our interviewees appraise their lives and themselves, experience later life (including relationships, self-fulfilment) and approach the future (strategies, plans). Attuned to different kinds of resonance, we disentangle, and explore the significance of, resonances for later-life experiences. We also explain them, suggesting how and why women born 1939–52 may be living with resonances that distinguish them from their predecessors and successors. How men born 1939–52, and indeed other cohorts, experience resonance is a matter for future research. The study of resonance can, as in our project, complement quantitative life-course research on the relationship between youth and later life, unravelling personal experience and bridging the temporalities of quantitative longitudinal research and qualitative study of lives in the present. Foregrounding co-presence as a way of approaching the relationship between youth and later life, resonance offers a fresh perspective on the lifecourse.

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Notes

1. Youth is a period typically characterised by a concentration and intensification of experiences: further education and training, sexual maturity, forming adult partnerships, heightened geographical mobilities, increased independence from parents and self-realisation (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006).
2. We use ‘lifecourse’ when describing the lifespan to distinguish it from the ‘life-course approach’.
3. This conceptualisation of resonance is not to be confused with Hartmut Rosa’s (2019), which concerns how subjects relate to the world: a particular quality of relationship, posited as a solution to alienation in late-modern life.
4. Recruitment of ELSA interviewees was arranged by the ELSA Data Sharing Committee and undertaken by NatCen, an independent social research institute. Our research had ethical approval from the University of Manchester. Interviews are archived with the UK Data Service 10.5255/UKDA-SN-855007.
5. Seventy case studies were judged appropriate for exploration of the range of women’s experiences in this cohort; the aim was not to provide numerical analysis of personal experience. It is beyond the scope of this article to engage meaningfully with numerical comparisons, or to systematically dissect trends and outliers in our qualitative data.
6. New kinds of resonances may emerge over time.

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