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## Risk and Resilience

What enables individuals to overcome adverse childhoods and move on to rewarding lives in adulthood? Drawing on data collected from two of Britain's richest research resources for the study of human development, the 1958 National Child Development Study and the 1970 British Cohort Study, Schoon investigates the phenomenon of resilience – the ability to adjust to and overcome adverse conditions. Comparing the experiences of over 30,000 individuals in two birth cohorts born twelve years apart, Schoon examines the transition from childhood into adulthood among individuals born in 1958 and 1970 respectively. The study focuses on academic attainment among individuals exposed to high versus low levels of socio-economic deprivation, but also considers behavioural adjustment, health and psychological well-being, as well as the stability of adjustment patterns in times of social change. This is a major work of reference and synthesis, that makes an important contribution to the study of life-long development.

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# Risk and Resilience

*Adaptations in Changing Times*

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*by*

Ingrid Schoon



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To Brian and Mary Low

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## Foreword by Glen H. Elder, Jr

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Over the past half century, a contextual view of human lives has emerged in the social and behavioural sciences. This perspective represents a major shift in orientation from age-specific domains, such as adolescence and young adulthood, to the full life course of human careers and development. Questions relate the developing organism to lived experience in a changing world. Distinctive of this change is the evolution of life-course theory and methods, the integration of biological models, and the rapid growth of longitudinal studies and their data archives. Few books better reflect these advances than Schoon's *Risk and Resilience: Adaptations in Changing Times* – an illuminating study of the life course, from birth to middle age, in two British birth cohorts. The two cohorts are distinguished by people who were born at different times.

In important respects, the framework of this project dates back to the longitudinal studies of Americans born in the 1920s. These studies generated fresh thinking about the life course by following study members into the Great Depression, World War II and the postwar era. The developmental effects of each life trajectory depended on whether they were marked by hardship, military service or higher education. Over the years a set of principles have come to define the life course framework which informs Schoon's study, life-long development, human agency, the timing of events, linked lives and historical context. The life course consists of age-graded trajectories and their life transitions, involving work and family, along with other domains. Transitions are embedded in trajectories, such as job entry in work careers.

These early studies of human development were quickly followed by an ambitious British initiative at the end of World War II. James Douglas launched a national longitudinal study of children born in one week in 1946. Twelve years later this study was followed by a national sample of the 1958 birth cohort, and then by another national sample of the 1970 birth cohort. A fourth national cohort was launched in 2000. The first three birth cohorts, equally spaced, provide an exceptional opportunity to assess the impact of social change on British lives, and the studies that

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have done so have documented an increasing social inequality and its adverse effects on families and lives.

*Risk and Resilience: Adaptations in Changing Times* is based on two British birth cohorts with markedly different life histories. The childhood of the 1958 cohort coincided with a time of extraordinary economic growth and social transformation, a 'Golden Age' in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, whereas the 1970 cohort grew up in an era of dislocation, instability and uncertainty. The two cohorts experienced the recessionary decade of the 1980s (the worst economic recessions of the past fifty years), but at very different times in their lives. The older cohort was more established in careers and in marriage. Comparisons of the two cohorts at the same age show many changes, including greater economic well-being and higher education for the 1970 cohort, but also an increase in socio-economic inequality, less marital stability and a higher level of emotional malaise. Gender differences tend to favour females, though life has become noticeably more stressful across the two cohorts for the least educated men and women.

The two longitudinal cohorts in this study provide a rare opportunity to investigate socio-economic change, social risks and their life-course effects on academic achievement and resilience in school, socio-economic status and psychological well-being in adulthood. But as any user of longitudinal data knows, the investigator has to make the best of available measurements and their timing. This is especially difficult in comparisons of two or more cohorts or samples. However, the 1958 and 1970 British cohorts offer an unusually good match, and Schoon has made the best of some inadequate measures, especially in relation to protective factors and to school achievement. Both cohort studies provided similar data for a multiple item index of social risk (e.g. parent social class, housing tenure, overcrowding, receipt of state benefits, amenities) and three times of measurement into adolescence. To minimise the construction of a risk index in which the components have differing effects on behavioural outcomes, the analysis used discrete groupings of indicators – with a focus on socio-economic disadvantage. In quantitative models, multiple social risks adversely influenced adult socio-economic status and psychological well-being through impaired academic achievement, though educational resilience minimised this outcome.

The study focuses on two types of life courses in adolescence with origins in social disadvantage, a trajectory of resilience in which the study member does better than expected and one characterised by increasing risk or vulnerability. The popularity of resilience as a developmental concept reflects a contemporary movement towards more

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positive psychologies, but its widespread use and diverse meanings have prompted critical appraisals and doubts about the concept's usefulness. Schoon addresses some of the key issues in this literature and proposes a commonly accepted definition – to wit, resilience is a process that relates positive adaptations to disadvantaged origins. She also makes a compelling case in favour of this theoretical approach to the life course and human development.

One of the challenges in following young people from childhood to the later years is that their characteristics are interrelated. A person is not a composite of isolated attributes, but instead resembles a system of characteristics. With this in mind, Schoon employs both person-centred and variable-centred analyses. Each method is appropriate for different questions. Children who displayed an above-average reading ability in childhood, despite a high-SES risk, were classified as following a trajectory of 'educational resilience'. Protective social ties proved to be an important source of this resilience. Vulnerability depicts the trajectory of the lower achievers. In adulthood, analyses compare the life-course experiences of these disadvantaged groups with those of a high SES-risk group. Some children of privileged circumstances also lost their advantage and became vulnerable, while others fared well across the adolescent years.

A pathway of resilience is frequently assumed to surmount the adverse developmental effects of 'growing up in a disadvantaged environment', but Schoon makes clear that very few of the disadvantaged escaped the limitations of their family origin. The 'hidden injuries' of their background are apparent in the middle years. As she observes, the 'experience of early social disadvantage has life-long consequences', in many cases even for the most resilient. Pathways of resilience from early family disadvantage have notable policy implications for social intervention but, as the study indicates, they seldom enable the young to completely escape the scars of a deprivational childhood.

The men and women in this longitudinal study were born only twelve years apart in Great Britain, but in many respects they grew up in different social worlds which shaped their lives. *Risk and Resilience: Adaptations in Changing Times* tells this story and concludes that a background of social disadvantage does not ensure a life of disadvantage. Some men and women who followed a pathway of resilience into the middle years have managed well the deprivations of the past, whereas others are handicapped by them. Such different experiences bear upon the quality of life in the later years, the next phase of this groundbreaking study.

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## Preface by John Bynner

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Secondary analysis of large-scale longitudinal survey data enable hypotheses to be tested about the specifics of life, as in economists' studies of 'returns to learning', but rarely the testing of comprehensive developmental theory as a whole. The vagaries of question selection and design means that operationalisation of key theoretical concepts and the specification of their relationships can be weak in any given study employing secondary data. Such data is more often used to contextualise theoretical development rather than fit the models to which it translates to empirical data. Karl Joreskog's pioneering work on the development of structural equation modelling was a breakthrough in offering through the LISREL programme a solution to the statistical modelling problem but examples of applying it or its many variants, such as AMOS, in a comprehensive theory testing programme are relatively rare.

Ingrid Schoon's work using the 1958 and 1970 British birth cohort studies, datasets to test and develop further a 'Developmental-contextual model' of human development is a superb example of such theory testing in action. She starts from a life-course perspective that sees human development, as a dynamic process – part constructed through human agency and part shaped through the changing (proximal and distal) contexts through which the individual moves. From this she builds a developmental model, embracing the key concepts of risk and resilience, turning points and escape from adversity through the deployment of personal and social resources. The key focus is on youth transitions: what determines the form the pathways to adulthood take and what are their consequences for achievement and fulfilment in later life.

The birth cohort study data is the perfect empirical counterpart to the theory in supplying the lifetime information against which to test and develop the model through a number of stages and in different domains. The result is a rich amalgam of research review, theoretical formulation and cumulative evidence from statistical analysis. The final chapters draw the work together with an overview of the contributions

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to knowledge that have come from it and a consideration of the policy implications to be derived from them.

With a background of long-standing interest in the 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts studies and the responsibility for directing them from 1989 to 2003, it is a particular pleasure for me to see their scientific potential realised so comprehensively and to have small part in the research programme itself. Howard Newby, when Chief Executive of the UK Economic and Social Research Council, described longitudinal studies as the equivalent of the large-scale facilities such as ‘atom smashers’ in the physical sciences that supply the acid test of theoretical propositions. Their closest counterpart in the social sciences are large-scale longitudinal studies that supply the key means of understanding the processes through which human beings flourish or decline in interaction with their environment. The design of each new follow-up of the birth cohorts starts from the premise of adding to the knowledge base in ways that will best help achievement of this goal, drawing on as wide a range of advice as possible from the scientific user community about the critical variables to include. Ingrid Schoon sets new standards in drawing out of the data the key resources for testing her theoretical ideas. The book is a major step forward in the secondary analysis of longitudinal data that will be a key reference text for many years to come.

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