

## ***This Week's Citation Classic***

Ryder N B. The cohort as a concept in the study of social change. *Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 30:843-61, 1965. [University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI]

**The arrival of a new birth cohort each year permits the society to persist despite mortality. Each new cohort is simultaneously a threat to stability and an opportunity for societal transformation. The congruence of social change and cohort differentiation suggests measuring the former by the latter. [The Social Sciences Citation Index® (SSCI®) indicates that this paper has been cited over 180 times since 1966.]**

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"When I first became obsessed with the subject of cohorts, in graduate school at Princeton in the late-1940s, there was appreciable awareness of the idea in formal demography, but little application, for want of lengthy time series of data. When the baby boom made a mockery of population projections, the cohort approach offered a way of at least reformulating the problem. It proved to be the right idea at the right time, although it was bound to develop in due course.

"On my dissertation examination, I was asked why one should make cohort calculations at all, and the best answer I could muster at the time was that that was the way people lived, aging *pari passu* with time. With the degree out of the way, I spent the next 15 years trying to come up with a less banal answer. A not entirely random search of the literature revealed the same idea in many guises and fields. As a measurement problem, it turns up wherever

there is interest in the life cycle characteristics of our long-lived species. From a mathematical standpoint, the basic idea is that, if one visualizes a surface as cut by a series of parallel plane sections at one angle, and again at another angle, the formal relationships between comparable parameters of the two series of plane section illuminate the distinction between longitudinal and cross-sectional data sets.

"Although some facility with such technical questions may have justified my employment, I felt obliged, as a member of a sociology department (at the University of Wisconsin, Madison) to talk sociology as well as demography. Accordingly, I tried to think of such technical questions in concert with a quite disparate body of writings consisting of theoretical and philosophical speculations in political and cultural history (characterized by names like Karl Mannheim and Jose Ortega y Gasset). Neither the technicians nor the theorists seemed aware of the existence of their counterparts, despite their common problem.

"In the past several decades, the cohort approach has grown into an indispensable part of the process of demographic measurement. Although my article may have helped accelerate the development a little, I suspect that the main stimulus was the progressive lengthening of the available time series of reliable population data. For sociologists and others, it may have provided some insight into how to think demographically about non-demographic subjects. At least it focused attention on the peculiarly complex problems of studying cultures during an era of rapid social change, and on one direction in which that complexity can be reduced. In addition to myself, several re-searchers have recently published work in this field."<sup>1-4</sup>

1. Glenn N D. Cohort analysis. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1977. 72 p.
2. Hastings D W & Berry L G, eds. Cohort analysis: a collection of interdisciplinary readings. Oxford, OH: Scripps Foundation for Research in Population Problems, 1979. 349 p.
3. Esler A. Generational studies: a basic bibliography. Williamsburg, VA: College of William and Mary, 1979. 314 p.
4. Ryder N B. The cohort approach: essays in the measurement of temporal variations in demographic behavior. New York: Arno Press, 1980. 206 p.