Social research usually entails taking a snapshot in time and space. The researchers who have produced this volume have taken several shots of the same group over a twenty year span. Phase I of the “class of ’73“ study began as a group of 2,555 grade 12 students in 97 secondary students in Ontario. Follow-ups were done at one and one and a half years (with a retention rate of about 84%), in 1978 after five years (59.6% of the original group), in 1987-88 (44.2%) and finally twenty-two years after Phase I, in 1995 (30.8%, or 788 of the initial group) (pp. 2-8).

Portraits over time capture the group at various stages of the life course, anticipating graduation, securing a first full-time job, and embarking on the personal project of child-rearing. Reading about the class of ’73 in 1995 is a bit like a class reunion. Not everyone comes. It is often the more successful who show up for a twenty-year reunion, often those who felt overlooked in school but who think they have made something of themselves and want a chance to gloat over their flash-in-the-pan schoolmate heroes. Similarly, a great deal of attrition occurred in the successive stages of the class of ’73 study, despite the admirable efforts of the research team to trace and contact members of their group. Nevertheless, the final snapshot is still broadly representative of the original graduating class, with some overrepresentation of the more highly educated and those from rural and small town Ontario..

One important part of the entire school cohort was missing from the beginning, consisting of drop-outs prior to grade 12, estimated to be about twenty percent of the total school population. The study group excluded those least likely to be conventionally successful and also, incidentally, most likely to disappear from successive stages of the study. The rich and powerful at the opposite end of the social spectrum were also conspicuously absent, though there were a few respondents (5) who reported having in excess of 150 employees. In between these extremes, however, the study includes people from a broad range of employment statuses and affords the researchers the opportunity to compare career patterns across a number of background variables. It is a rich study because it incorporates what single-time surveys omit: the dimension of social history, permitting an interpretation of the findings against the backdrop of social change. While this single cohort study does not directly allow cross-generational comparisons, it does provide a base from which other groups may be contrasted. As the authors note, the experiences of the
generation that matured in the 1990s faced a negatively structured job market relative to 1973.

Quantitative data are aggregated and individual respondents disappear in the reports of percentages and overall trends, which require large numbers to be meaningful. Furthermore, what people mean when they answer questions on a survey is best discovered by asking them directly. Recognizing the weaknesses of the survey approach to data gathering, the researchers adopted a multi-technique approach that included 155 individual interviews (100 in 78-79; 55 in 1994-95) as well as an additional 44 participants in focus groups during the last phase.

The authors utilize a life-course perspective which means that members of a given cohort are likely to approximate an overall, normative set of transitions as they age together, from graduation to retirement. Theoretically, they attempt to straddle if not overcome the seemingly permanent dichotomy in social science between the structural and choice elements of individuated life outcomes. In their theoretical model, the two fundamental components of structure and agency are distinct though mutually conditioned. In turn, these primary determinants affect the objective situation of the respondents (their SES, gender, ethnicity, region), as well as their subjective understandings (such as aspirations and choices). This complex of factors is further mediated by the “structured individualization” of the stages in the life course determined by age (p. 22).

This model suggests a way to talk about the factors involved in the individual’s experience of her or his life course and the variety of possibilities that produce outcomes over time. A given outcome for any individual is some function of these complex, interacting elements, which include individual choices at many crucial transition points in the life course. The model makes intuitive sense in terms of the way I perceive my life, and the ways the respondents apparently perceived theirs. It is a pragmatic use of the agency/structure dichotomy, although the formulation poses a larger, theoretical question that is not addressed by the authors. Individuals perceive themselves in a given social context and make choices within the range of alternatives they perceive to be available. You can discuss an individual’s experiences in these terms, as the authors do throughout the book and, in the penultimate chapter, by a longer analysis of five biographies. The unasked question is the effect of this individuated action on the social structure. I’ll return to this question.

The employment and mobility experiences of the class of ’73 are significantly influenced by the structural side of the agency-structure duality. Class and location shape the unequal use of institutional opportunities (primarily education) even while education, as an agency outlet, has a strong independent effect on individual location. This was especially true of the class of ’73 since
they benefited from an exceptional expansion of formal education, opening opportunities for a wide spectrum of the population. The effects of university education were particularly striking on shaping different life course outcomes. Relative to comparative cohorts, the class of ’73 consistently utilized the educational resources available to them. Gender also played an important role in shaping the particular employment outcomes within broader occupational or educational categories (the choice of programme, the type of work within an occupational category), and also played a subsequent role structuring family and occupational profiles.

One of the main strengths of the analysis in *Opportunity and Uncertainty* is the incorporation of an historical framework by which to understand life course outcomes. Structured factors are effectual variously in time and space. Periods of expanding capitalism produce one set of circumstances for the exercise of agency; periods of economic relapse establish other, often undesirable avenues of choice. The class of ’73, as late baby boomers, imbibed the expectations of post-war prosperity with their infant formula, weathered the cold war, and went to school in a period of “unprecedented curricular flexibility” (p. 35). Still, there were whispered hints of more limited futures, more underemployment than unemployment. They experienced more *Opportunity* than *Uncertainty*, but the future was casting a long shadow backwards, especially for social science and teacher-training graduates.

Mobility patterns were, predictably complex, in part because of difficulties operationalizing mobility. On the crudest scale, while overall the majority remained in their class of origin, the class of ’73 experienced slightly more negative than positive intergenerational mobility, particularly among middle status occupational groups (Table 5-1, p. 122), a pattern that held more strongly for women than men. Women, on the other hand, also experienced the greatest upward intergenerational mobility. On a 9-category system, on the other hand, the norm was upward mobility (Table 5.3).

Children of immigrant families tended to do better than Canadian-born, particularly among men. This illustrates the importance of agency, as new Canadians became mobile for the presumed advantages and then negotiated their new environment to realize their aspirations. The greatest source of satisfaction for the class of ’73 was found in their family life, in children and marriage, more than work, though most were also subjectively “satisfied” with their work. One surprising finding was that family was less important for class members in rural and small town areas compared with metro Toronto. There was a high proportion of dual income families, while role-sharing within families was affected by class variables and gender; for example, women were primarily responsible for household labour. These are merely samplers. The authors have
access to a very rich and detailed data source and it is easy to get lost in the
Tables and reported percentages, varying by numerous background variables. It
is often daunting. To their credit from the point of view of the average reader,
the authors restrict their statistical analysis to percentage tables. Walter Heinze,
in his foreword, praises the “carefully crafted narration”. I wonder, though,
whether this isn’t more a book for the specialist.

Part of this praise about the narration reflects the use of illustrative case
interviews, which is another important strength of the book. The “negotiated
order” perspective – in the sense of understanding the parts of the whole -- is put
into the context of social history and the revealed directions of life course
grooves that people will predictably follow, at least in the aggregate. The
Interview data, by their nature, offers a more complex image of the way
individuals navigate the constraint/agency paradigm. Interviews breathe life into
the figures, illustrating the structural tendencies, highlighting exceptions to
them, and revealing what individuals meant by the choices they made and how
they perceived the environment in which they made them. The point of the
illustrative material is not that examples “confirm” aggregate tendencies (p. 193),
but to show that, “Personal histories, circumstances, priorities, and choices, as
well as the vagaries of the economy, gave different shape to their respective life
courses” (p. 113). The example biographies demonstrate the “unique ways in
which people manage social and political capital”. Every life is, in a sense,
unique. Social science must abstract from this overwhelming mass of data.

The class of ’73 may be quite familiar to many working academics, as baby
 boomers approach retirement. I’m unlikely to know any of the people behind
the pseudonyms, but I know people like them. More to the point, I don’t know
many of them. If aggregate data gives you a more objective view of the reality
surrounding you, the interview data allows an appreciation of the life
experiences of people you would otherwise never know.

I want to conclude this brief review by raising a question about the use of
the agency/structure dichotomy. The way this distinction has often been
presented in social theory is that structure only exists insofar as individuals
reproduce it in their everyday actions. A key question, though, is whether the
whole is equal to or greater than the sum of its parts. The diagram illustrating
the theoretical model used by the authors has two, equally determining arrows,
representing the interaction between agency and structure. The degree of
effectivity of individual agencies in the reproduction or change of the social
formation varies by their structural locations. From the point of view of a study
of the elite, a focus on agency amounts to conspiracy theory.

By raising the question of the “whole”, I am going beyond what the
authors intend. As was made clear earlier, the study does not include those who
are most likely to have paramount effectiveness in determining the structural parameters within which we, as well as the class of ’73, negotiate our life courses. The theoretical model in *Opportunity and Uncertainty* does not imply any macro claims.

Structure persists over time, irrespective of the specific individuals who come to occupy the spaces. From the perspective of pure capitalism, who does what is immaterial. Reproducing capitalism has been compatible with a variety of social forms, including a formal mechanism for meritocracy. Once labour was free, the individualized labour market meant precisely that all those born with spoons of base metals were on their own to compete, to achieve or fail, to choose within the structured options determined by the stage of the division of labour. Capitalism created this degree of hyper-agency, or under-determinism. From the perspective of actually existing capitalism, this agency is hedged in by social structural factors such as gender and class-position. The aggregate data show that agency is constrained; that social structures persist over time and tend towards reproduction.
Social research usually involves taking a snapshot at one time and in one place. The researchers who have written *Opportunity and Uncertainty* have taken several portraits of the same group, capturing this “class of ’73” at various stages of their life course, anticipating graduation, securing a first full-time job, and embarking on the personal project of child-rearing.

Reading about the class of ’73 is reminiscent of attending a class reunion. Not everyone comes to a reunion and it is often the more successful who show up. Similarly, a great deal of attrition occurred in the successive stages of the longitudinal study described in this book, despite the admirable efforts of the research team to trace and contact members of their group. The study was conducted through six phases beginning with 2,555 grade 12 students in 97 secondary students in Ontario. Five successive follow-ups were done culminating in 1995, when 30.8%, or 788 from the initial group returned surveys. While less that a third remained, the final snapshot is still broadly representative of the original graduating class, with some overrepresentation of the more successful and highly educated, and those from rural and small town Ontario.

Not everyone made it for the original class picture in 1973. Among the missing were the approximately 20 per cent who had dropped out prior to grade 12. They would have been least likely to be conventionally successful and most likely to disappear from successive stages of any study. Typical of studies of school attendees, the rich and powerful at the opposite end of the social spectrum were also conspicuously absent, though five of the respondents reported having more than 150 employees.

In between these extremes the study includes people from a very broad range of employment statuses and affords the researchers the opportunity to compare career and life course patterns using a number of background and achievement variables. While this single cohort study does not directly allow cross-generational comparisons, it does provide a base from which the experience of other groups may be contrasted. As the authors note, the generation that matured in the 1990s faced a much more negatively structured job market relative to 1973, suggesting a direction for future research.

The majority of the findings reported consist of quantitative data from the various survey phases, though primarily from the last phase. Inevitably, individual respondents disappear in the reports of percentages and overall trends, which require the aggregation of large numbers of respondents to be meaningful. To compensate, the researchers adopted a multi-technique
approach that included almost 200 individual interviews or focus group participants. What people mean when they answer questions on a survey is best discovered by asking them directly.

The authors utilize a life-course perspective. Members of a given cohort are likely to approximate an overall, normative set of transitions as they age together, from graduation to retirement. Theoretically, the authors attempt to straddle if not overcome the seemingly permanent dichotomy in social science between the structural and choice determinants of life outcomes. In their theoretical model, structure and agency are distinguished, though they mutually condition each other. In turn, these primary determinants affect the objective situation of the respondents as well as their subjective understandings. This complex of factors is further mediated by the “structured individualization” of the stages in the life course determined by age.

This model suggests a way to talk about the factors involved in the individual’s construction of her or his life course. A given outcome for any individual is some function of these complex, interacting elements, which include individual choices within the range of alternatives they perceive to be available at many crucial transition points in their life. The model makes intuitive sense in terms of the ways the respondents apparently perceived their lives. It is a pragmatic use of the agency/structure dichotomy which raises a larger, theoretical question about the effect of this individuated action on the social structure as a whole. This is not addressed by the authors. The theoretical model in *Opportunity and Uncertainty* does not imply any macro claims or application to the social formation as a whole.

Structure persists over time, irrespective of the specific individuals who come to occupy the spaces. From the perspective of pure capitalism, who does what is immaterial. Reproducing capitalism has been compatible with a variety of social forms, including a formal mechanism for meritocracy. Once labour was free, the individualized labour market meant precisely that all those born with spoons of base metals were on their own to compete, to achieve or fail, to choose within the structured options determined by the stage of the division of labour. Capitalism created this degree of hyper-agency, or under-determinism. From the perspective of actually existing capitalism, this agency is hindered or accelerated by social structural factors such as gender, class-position, and ethnicity.

As *Opportunity and Uncertainty* demonstrates, the educational, employment, and mobility experiences of the class of ’73 were significantly influenced by the structural side of the agency-structure duality. Class and location shaped the unequal use of institutional opportunities (primarily education) even while education, as an agency outlet, has a strong independent effect on individual location. This was especially true of the class of ’73 since
they benefited from an exceptional expansion of formal education, opening opportunities and resources which the class of ’73 consistently utilized. Gender shaped the particular outcomes within broader occupational or educational categories (the choice of programme, the type of work within an occupational category), and also played a key subsequent role structuring family life.

One of the main strengths of the analysis in *Opportunity and Uncertainty* is the incorporation of an historical framework which depicts the changing groves that groups will predictably follow in the aggregate, or individuals will navigate in the construction of their individuated life courses. Structured factors are effective variously in time and space. The class of ’73, as late baby boomers, imbibed the expectations of post-war prosperity with their infant formula, weathered the cold war, and endured school in a period of “unprecedented curricular flexibility”. They experienced more *Opportunity* than *Uncertainty*, though there were whispered hints of more limited futures, more underemployment than unemployment. The future was casting a long shadow backwards, especially for social science and teacher-training graduates.

Mobility patterns were, predictably, complex, though mobility is a difficult concept to operationalize. On the crudest scale, while overall the majority remained in their class of origin, the class of ’73 experienced slightly more negative than positive intergenerational social mobility, particularly among middle status occupational groups (Table 5-1, p. 122). When a 9-category system was utilized, the norm for the class was considerable upward mobility, though largely into adjacent or nearly adjacent categories (Table 5.3).

Children of immigrant families tended to do better than Canadian-born, particularly among men. This illustrates the importance of agency within the structure, as new Canadians entered the country for the presumed advantages of mobility and then negotiated their new environment to realize their aspirations. The class of ’73 claimed to find their greatest source of satisfaction in their family life -- in children and marriage -- more than in their work, though most were also subjectively “satisfied” with their employment.

These are merely samplers. There weren’t many surprising or unexpected findings in the data analysis (although family was subjectively less important for class members in rural and small town areas compared with metro Toronto). The importance of the study is in the details, in the potential for comparison with other cohorts at different times and places. The authors have access to a very rich and detailed data source presented in numerous tables with full discussions of the findings, broken down by numerous background variables. It is not a casual read. Baby boomers will be interested in the book because, characteristically, it is about them. It is, in addition, a landmark study that will be a reference point for researchers profiling future generations. To their credit
from the point of view of the average reader, the authors restricted their statistical analysis to percentage tables.

The use of illustrative case interviews is another important strength of the narration. The interview data, by their nature, offers a more complex image of the way individuals negotiate the constraint/agency paradigm. Interviews breathe life into the figures, illustrating the structural tendencies and highlighting variations. The point of the illustrative material is not that examples “confirm” aggregate tendencies (p. 193), but to show the “unique ways in which people manage social and political capital”, demonstrated in five detailed biographies presented in the penultimate chapter. Every life is, in a sense, unique. As social science practitioners, the authors necessarily abstract from this overwhelming mass of data.

The class of ’73 may be quite familiar to working academics, many of whom are baby boomers approaching retirement. They are unlikely to know any of the people behind the pseudonyms, but they know people like them. More to the point, there are many they don’t know. If aggregate data gives you a more objective view of the surrounding reality, interview data allows an appreciation of the life experiences of people you would otherwise never know. They’re the class members who don’t show up for the reunions.

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