CHAPTER 1

The Emergence and Development of Life Course Theory

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Today, the life course perspective is perhaps the pre-eminent theoretical orientation in the study of lives, but this has not always been the case. The life histories and future trajectories of individuals and groups were largely neglected by early sociological research. In the pioneering study, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (1918–1920)*, W. I. Thomas (with Florian Znaniecki) first made use of such histories and trajectories and argued strongly that they be investigated more fully by sociologists. By the mid-1920s, Thomas was emphasizing the vital need for a "longitudinal approach to life history" using life record data (Volkart, 1951, p. 593). He advocated that studies investigate "many types of individuals with regard to their experiences and various past periods of life in different situations" and follow "groups of individuals into the future, getting a continuous record of experiences as they occur." Though this advice went unheeded for decades, Thomas's early recommendations anticipated study of the life course and longitudinal research that has become such a central part of modern sociology and other disciplines.

As late as the 1950s, C. Wright Mills lacked an appropriate research base when he proposed a field of life course study in the behavioral sciences, a field which was intended to encompass, in his words, "the study of biography, of history, and of the problems of their

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intersection within social structure" (1959, p. 149). Quite simply, the social pathways of human lives, particularly in their historical time and place, were not a common subject of study at this time. Consequently, social scientists knew little about how people lived their lives from childhood to old age, even less about how their life pathways influenced the course of development and aging, and still less about the importance of historical and geographic contexts. Considering this, one should not be surprised that, during this period, the scholarly literature contained no reference to the concept of the life course and graduate programs offered no seminars on life course topics.

Disruptive societal events, such as the Great Depression and World War II, and the pre-war lack of financial support for the social and behavioral sciences all contributed to this neglect of life histories and trajectories. Not until the 1960s were Thomas's recommendations acted upon, after a convergence of influences necessitated the understanding of how people lived their lives in changing times and across various contexts. At the onset of the 21st century, however, such life pathways are widely recognized within the social and behavioral sciences as the life course. The study of the life course crosses disciplinary boundaries (e.g., sociology, psychology, history), fields (e.g., aging, human development, family demography), and cultural borders (e.g., North America, Europe, Asia).

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to trace the evolution of life course study from its inauspicious beginning to its contemporary prominence. We begin with the "contextual challenge," in which the rise of the life course movement clearly has its origins. This challenge represents the confluence of major social and intellectual changes during the 20th century, beginning with the maturation of pioneering longitudinal studies and the recognition that knowledge about adolescent and adult development could not be extrapolated from child-based models. We also cover the articulation and refinement of theoretical models, such as the life cycle and career, and review basic life course concepts, such as age-based trajectories and transitions. We close by describing, discussing, and illustrating five paradigmatic principles that collectively define the primary analytic and conceptual themes of life course studies. This discussion should provide a context for the life course studies that are presented in this volume.

Before moving on, we should pause to explain two important details that are embedded in our discussion. First, we view the life course as a *theoretical orientation*, one with particular relevance to scholarship on human development and aging, and we use the term "theory" with this particular meaning. According to Merton (1968), theoretical orientations establish a common field of inquiry by providing a framework for descriptive and explanatory research. Such a framework covers the identification and formulation of research problems, rationales for variable selection, and strategies for research design and data analysis. Drawing on this definition of a theoretical orientation, we view the life course as consisting of age-graded patterns that are embedded in social institutions and history. This view is grounded in a contextualist perspective and emphasizes the implications of social pathways in historical time and place for human development and aging.

Second, the life course is often used interchangeably with other terms, such as life span, life history, and life cycle. All three terms are part of life course vocabulary, but we argue that none is synonymous with the life course. For example, life span, as in life-span sociology or psychology, specifies the temporal scope of inquiry and specialization. Thus, a life-span study is one that extends across a substantial portion of life, particularly one that links behavior in two or more life stages. This scope moves beyond age-specific studies on childhood or early adulthood. Life history, on the other hand, typically indicates the chronology of activities or events across the life course (e.g., residence, household composition, family events) and is often drawn from age-event matrices or retrospective life calendars, which record the year and month at which a transition

occurs in each domain and are well-suited for event history analysis (Brückner & Mayer, 1998; Mayer & Tuma, 1990). Lastly, life cycle has been used to describe a sequence of events in life, but in population studies it refers to the reproductive process from one generation to the next. All populations have a life cycle, but only some people have children.

THE CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGE

Unlike today, the study of human lives was once exceedingly rare in sociology and psychology, especially in relation to socio-historical context (Elder, 1998). During the 1950s, sociological theory and research had stagnated to a certain degree. Sociological activities rarely dug deep into the complexities of life and too often, in the words of Robert Nisbet (1969), existed in the "timeless realm of the abstract". This perspective was encouraged by the rapid diffusion of social surveys, which covered a wide breadth of topics with little depth, and the pursuit of grand theory, as embodied by Talcott Parsons. Yet, this period was soon replaced by a virtual explosion of inquiry that explored the continuity and change of human lives in relation to interpersonal, structural, and historical forces (Elder & Johnson, 2001).

How could a vigorous era of research arise from such seemingly infertile ground? The answer to this question lies in five major trends of the 20th century: (1) the maturation of early child development samples; (2) the rapidity of social change; (3) changes in the composition of the U.S. and other populations; (4) the changing age structure of society; and 5) the revolutionary growth of longitudinal research over the last three decades. These trends refer to developments in North America and particularly in the United States, though some (such as the pace of social change, rate of aging in society, and the growth of the longitudinal studies) also apply to Europe (Heinz & Krüger, 2001).

Pioneering psychologists of the early 20th century launched key longitudinal studies of young people. Prominent examples include the Oakland Growth Study of children born in 1920–21 (Jones, Bayley, MacFarlane, & Honzik, 1971), the Berkeley Guidance Study of children born in 1928–29 (MacFarlane, 1938), and the Stanford-Terman study of gifted children born in 1900–1920 (Terman & Oden, 1959). Typically, such studies were designed to follow the developmental patterns of children and were not meant to extend past childhood. Nevertheless, many were extended into the adult years and beyond, collecting information on education, work, marriage, and parenthood. This wealth of data prompted a new way of thinking about human lives and development—studying life trajectories across multiple stages of life, recognizing that developmental processes extend past childhood, exploring issues of behavioral continuity and change (Elder, 1994). In other words, these early studies, originally modest in scope, lay the groundwork for longitudinal study of life history advocated by Thomas.

The young people in these early studies experienced the enormous social change that swept through the 20th century—the Great Depression, two World Wars, the Cold War, Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, periodic prosperity and economic downturns. These unforeseen events had profound influences on life trajectories, both individual and age cohort. The early longitudinal studies were not designed with such sweeping changes in mind. For example, Jean MacFarlane's carefully formulated randomized experimental design for the Berkeley study was destroyed by the pressing needs of the study families in the Great Depression (Elder, 1998); families in the control and experimental groups sought guidance and support from the research staff.

The men in Terman's study who fought in World War II wrote about their war experiences in the margins of surveys that neglected to ask them about such experiences. They were

puzzled by the study's indifference to the war, an indifference noted many years later by Robert Sears, a distinguished psychologist at Stanford (personal communication, 1989). Yet, such events, and the new circumstances they ushered in, could not be ignored for long. New interest evolved in the ways that individual lives are linked to social change. Research that grew out of such interest, largely centered on the study of cohort and period effects, advanced sociological understanding of temporality and historical time (Ryder, 1965). This new sociological activity mirrored the emergence, in the 1960s, of social history (Thernstrom, 1964), a field of study that sought to understand the lives and times of ordinary people.

Related to social change is the changing demography of the American population over the last century. As the "first new nation" (Lipset, 1963), the United States served as a crucible for the study of diversity. The mixture of various immigrant groups within the general population gave greater visibility to the importance of social and cultural ecologies. The racial and ethnic diversity of the United States, growing with time (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999), mirrors other forms of diversity that are entrenched in American society: socioeconomic, gender, urban versus rural. The salience of such diversity on a social level emphasized the need to understand diversity on an individual level—how the trajectories of individual lives differ across social groups (Elder, 1998). Such questions are now a common part of sociological inquiry on the social context of human lives.

One key aspect of the changing American demography concerns the age structure of society, which has undergone a major transformation in recent decades due to increasing longevity and declining fertility and mortality (Uhlenberg and Kirby, 1998). Rapid growth of the oldest segment of society—the aging of the United States—assigned greater significance to problems of the aged (Elder, 2000). Efforts to study such problems led to increasing interest in the relation of earlier phases of life to later phases, from childhood to adulthood, and the power of larger social forces to shape the lifelong developmental trajectories of individuals (Elder & Johnson, 2001). One of the more fruitful areas of aging research, including developmental psychology and social demography, involves the concept of social clocks, or normative timetables, which refer to the expectations for appropriate times and ages of important life transitions. This line of research, pioneered by Bernice Neugarten in the 1950s (Neugarten & Datan, 1973), helped to demonstrate the enormous diversity of people's lives and also how social norms give meaning to, and even direct, individual trajectories.

The final push towards a more complex treatment of human lives came from the longitudinal research projects that began in the 1960s. Examples include the National Longitudinal Surveys (see Pavalko & Smith, 1999), the National Longitudinal Study of Mature Women (see Moen, Dempster-McClain, & Williams, 1992), the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (see Duncan & Morgan, 1985), the British national longitudinal studies (1946, 1958, 1970) and the 1958 Swedish cohort studied by David Magnusson (Magnusson, 1988). In many ways, such projects launched the long-term study of human lives in life-span psychology and life course sociology (Elder, 1998) by allowing the examination of life trajectories across multiple stages of life and by creating the need for new theoretical and methodological models for studying life-long development (Cairns, Elder, & Costello, 1996; Young, Savola, & Phelps, 1991).

One key innovation has been the use of both prospective and retrospective data collection, which allows the creation of detailed life histories (Giele & Elder, 1998). This innovation goes hand in hand with statistical innovations, such as event history analysis (Mayer & Tuma, 1990). Such changes in empirical procedures, statistical techniques, and interpretive approaches are at the heart of life course research. Though life-course development in the United States has been quantitative to a large extent, a distinctive emphasis in European studies centers on individual biographies and in-depth interviews (Heinz & Krüger, 2001).

The five factors, which encompass changes in history, social demography, and scientific inquiry, converged to generate interest in life course research. The contextual study of lives advanced from near invisibility to a thriving area of sociological research, and particularly of developmental and sociological social psychology. Collectively across disciplines, this work entails multiple levels, from the macro structures and social institutions of society to the micro experience of individuals, and draws upon both quantitative and qualitative data in a mixed method approach.

RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGE

Out of these developments came greater recognition that lives are influenced by an ever-changing historical and biographical context. Yet a variety of conceptual and methodological tools were still needed in order to study life patterns and their dynamics in time. The life course as a theoretical orientation came from this desire to understand social pathways, their developmental effects, and their relation to personal and social-historical conditions.

Early models of social pathways generally centered on a single role sequence like that of a life cycle (Elder, 1978; Hareven, 1978). Children mature, marry, and have children who then grow up and start a family as the cycle continues into another generation. The writings of Paul Glick (1946) and Reuben Hill (1970) on the family cycle exemplify this approach. They described a set of ordered stages in adult family life from courtship and engagement to marital dissolution through a spouse's death. Of course, this concept was limited in that not everyone participated in familial reproduction and by its narrow application to family life.

The concept of "career" was another way of linking roles across the life course. These careers are based on role histories in education, work, or family. Though readily applicable to multiple domains of life, these models most often focused on a single domain, oversimplifying to a great extent the lives of people who were in reality dealing with multiple roles simultaneously. Moreover, much like the family cycle, the concept of career did not locate individuals in historical context or identify their temporal location within the life span. In other words, the available models of social pathways lacked mechanisms connecting lives with biographical and historical time, and the changes in social life that spanned this time.

With a renewed consciousness that linked individual lives to social change, a number of historically based studies emerged (Modell, 1989). Bringing in history provided a necessary contextual understanding. As historian E. P. Thompson once put it, "The discipline of history is above all a discipline of context" (cited by Goldthorpe, 1991, p. 212). Hareven's (1982) study of families in the textile mill community of Manchester explores the implications of industrial change for workers and their families. Growing rapidly at the turn of the century, the Amoskeag Mill was at one time the largest mill in the world. After its peak of prosperity during World War I, the industry declined, eventually collapsing in the 1930s. The mill's shutdown in 1936 left an entire labor force stranded. Hareven's focus on successive worker cohorts during the declining economic conditions of the 1920s and 1930s relates changing historical circumstance to individual lives.

Another excellent example of this type of sociohistoric research is Barker's (Barker & Schoggen, 1973; Barker & Wright 1955; see also Modell & Elder, 2002) examination of the changing developmental contexts of children in rural Kansas in the 1950s and 1960s. His study explores the implications of age-specialization in behavior settings, which limits children's observation of grown-up behavior. Barker observed a decline in the proportion of child and adolescent public activities that involved prominent roles for children upon whom

all participants depended. This accompanied an increasing concentration of their activity within the formal institution of education.

Within schools, the number and variety of behavior settings (and, by far, formal classes most prominent among these) increased, as newer, larger schools came into being. Yet Barker viewed children's involvement in community settings *not* intentionally organized around children (e.g., shops, offices, churches), in contrast to schools, as having unique implications for development. For in proximity to those who enacted the chief roles in public behavior settings to which young people were admitted, grown-up behavior could be observed, modeled, and if adults entrusted kids with active roles, informally apprenticed.

In pursuit of models of the life course that would reflect historical and biographical context, a number of useful concepts have been developed. Each provides a way of thinking about how lives are socially organized. *Social pathways* are the trajectories of education and work, family and residences that are followed by individuals and groups through society. These pathways are shaped by historical forces and are often structured by social institutions. Individuals generally work out their own life course and trajectories in relation to institutionalized pathways and normative patterns. They are subject to change, both from the impact of the broader contexts in which they are embedded and from the impact of the aggregation of lives that follow these pathways. Large-scale social forces can alter these pathways through planned interventions (e.g., funding for tertiary education) and unplanned changes (e.g., economic cycles and war). Individuals choose the paths they follow, yet choices are always constrained by the opportunities structured by social institutions and culture.

Trajectories, or sequences of roles and experiences, are themselves made up of *transitions*, or changes in state or role. Examples of transitions include leaving the parental home, becoming a parent, or retiring. The time between transitions is known as a *duration*. Long durations enhance behavioral stability through acquired obligations and vested interests.

Transitions often involve changes in status or identity, both personally and socially, and thus open up opportunities for behavioral change. For instance, Wellman et al. (1997) found that the nature and composition of friendship networks change dramatically when young adults marry. Transitions early in life may also have lifelong implications for trajectories, by shaping later events, experiences, and transitions. Adolescent child-bearing (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987) and military service (Sampson & Laub, 1996), are two well-documented examples of transition experiences with lifetime consequences.

Turning points involve a substantial change in the direction of one's life, whether subjective or objective. A turning point may involve returning to school during midlife, for example. Turning points at work were perceived by respondents in the Cornell Couples and Careers Study to be quite common, with over half reporting such an experience in the prior three years (Wethington, Pixley, & Kavey, 2003). Most of these turning points specifically involve work issues, including job changes and job insecurity, rather than family transitions that might be thought to alter the direction of one's work life.

These concepts reflect the temporal nature of lives, conveying movement through historical and biographical time. Age and its varied connections to time became a primary vehicle for understanding the changing contexts of lives.

AGE, TIMING, AND THE LIFE COURSE

Time operates at both a sociohistorical and personal level. In early studies, time entered through the concept of *generation* and the succession of generations in the life cycle.

Membership in a generation linked individuals to the lives of older and younger family members. Generation-based models viewed individual lives in terms of the reproductive life cycle and intergenerational processes of socialization. Ultimately, however, the concept proved inadequate. It suffered from the same basic limitation as the family cycle—a loose connection to historical time. One only needs to consider the wide age-range of men and women having their first child to see potential disparity between age and generational status.

Locating people in cohorts by birth year provides more precise historical placement. Cohorts, in effect, link age and historical time. Historical changes often have different implications for people of different ages—that is, for people who differ in life stage (Ryder, 1965). People of different ages bring different experiences and resources to situations and consequently adapt in different ways to new conditions. When historical change differentiates the lives of successive birth cohorts, it generates a *cohort effect*. Older and younger children, for example, were differentially vulnerable to the economic stresses of the Great Depression (Elder, 1974, 1999). History also takes the form of a *period effect* when the impact of social change is relatively uniform across successive birth cohorts. Both period and cohort effects constitute evidence of historical influences.

An example of these multiple effects is provided by Robinson and Jackson (2001) in their analysis of social change in interpersonal trust from 1972 to 1998. Social scientists have posed the question of whether trust has declined in America, owing to events of the past 30 years, such as Watergate. Using annual national surveys (the General Social Survey), the authors attempt to estimate age, period and cohort effects. They find an aging effect in which trust is lowest among the youngest respondents, increases up to middle age, and then levels off. They also find evidence of a decline in levels of trust for American cohorts born after 1940, perhaps representing a non-linear cohort effect. Alternatively, this pattern could represent an age-specific period effect, as social factors began to decrease trust in the 1980s among young and middle-aged adults. It should be noted that the estimation of age-period-cohort effects is always provisional since age, period and year are confounded.

Much effort to understand historical influence on lives has been devoted to examining variations in age-related change across successive birth cohorts (e.g., Nesselroade & Baltes, 1974). Alternatively, measuring the exposure of people to changing environments even within a cohort has advantages (e.g., Elder & Pellerin, 1998). Members of a birth cohort are not uniformly exposed to change, suggesting that cohort subgroups should be identified in terms of similar exposure. Cohort membership is often only a proxy for exposure to historical change. The historical experience of people in a specific birth cohort may vary significantly.

Variation can occur at both macro- and micro-levels. One macro-level example of within cohort variations concerns geography, from a longitudinal study that is following 12th grade students (1983–1985) from fifteen regions of the former Soviet Union up to 1999 and beyond (Titma & Tuma, 1995). Called "Paths of a Generation", the study assessed the life expectations, achievements and backgrounds of these young people before the Soviet Union disintegrated circa 1990, and then traced their lives into a period of extraordinary change and instability. One region retained the command economy of the old Soviet Union (Belarus), while others adopted a market economy (e.g., Estonia) or returned to a more primitive rural exchange system (e.g., Tajikistan).

The socioeconomic lives of men and women resembled the changes of their respective regions of the old Soviet Union. The Estonian cohort is most prosperous, whereas downward trajectories are common among other youth, such as those from Belarus. Despite such regional differences in the Titma and Tuma (1995) study, and profound social instability, the future of this generation to date was written in large part by their personal accomplishments,

self-assessments, and goals when they were first contacted in high school, which were more consequential than family background.

A micro-level example of within cohort variation concerns individual roles and personal attributes. Consider children who grew up in hard times during the Great Depression (Elder, 1974, 1999). Girls were drawn into domestic responsibilities with their mothers and sometimes *instead* of their employed mothers, while the greater autonomy of boys was coupled with earning opportunities in the larger community. The greater family involvement of girls exposed them to more family tensions and conflicts than boys. These different roles were coupled with corresponding pathways into the adult years, as involved girls became more family-centered women. Employed boys became more attached to their work role and career as adults.

In addition to the link between age and historical time, age as a social construction also differentiates the life course. The social meanings of age can structure the life course through age expectations, and informal sanctions, social timetables, and generalized age grades (such as childhood or adolescence) (Neugarten, 1996; Settersten & Hagestad, 1996a, 1996b). A normative concept of social time specifies an appropriate age for transitions such as entry into school, marriage, and retirement, leading to relatively "early" and "late" transitions.

Explanations of life events that are based on these normative beliefs are common in the research literature, yet we still have little empirical knowledge of such norms and how they are experienced. How are age expectations constructed, maintained, and learned by others? Moreover, little is known about variability in age expectations and sanctions across social class and racial/ethnic groups. Yet, empirical findings are beginning to cumulate on variations in the age boundaries of particular phases of the life course, such as the transition to adulthood (Shanahan, 2000).

Thus, age represents not only a point in the life span and a historical marker (Ryder, 1965) but also a subjective understanding about the temporal nature of life. With the recognition that social and personal meanings are attached to age came greater attention to the timing of transitions and the duration of states in the life course. The timing of entry into first grade, for example, can place children on different trajectories of success and failure (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988). Duration refers to the span of time between successive changes in state. Length of exposure to environmental conditions may have developmental consequences, as when persistently poor children have increasing rates of antisocial behavior compared to other children (McLeod & Shanahan, 1996). Duration is also linked to embeddedness in the social environment. The greater the duration of a status or social role, the more occupants are committed by others to remain in place (Becker, 1961). Examples include the duration of residence. Long durations, therefore, increase the likelihood of behavioral continuity over the life course.

PARADIGMATIC PRINCIPLES IN LIFE COURSE THEORY

The life course paradigm that emerged from the complex interplay of forces described previously is best viewed as a theoretical orientation that guides research on human lives within context. As such, it aids scientists in the formulation of empirical questions, conceptual development, and research design. The life course provides a framework for studying phenomena at the nexus of social pathways, developmental trajectories, and social change. Five general principles, derived from research in the social and behavioral sciences, provide guidance for such pursuits. This foundation is described in some detail after we present and discuss each principle.

1. *The Principle of Life-Span Development: Human development and aging are lifelong processes*

Understanding developmental processes is advanced by taking a long-term perspective. Development does not end at age 18. Adults can and do experience fundamental changes—biological, psychological, social—that are developmentally meaningful. Substantial changes occur, for example, in work orientations during the early adult years (Johnson, 2001b). For instance, adult women receive benefits, in both mental and physical health, from social integration and multiple role activity across the life course, and these benefits may increase in the later years (Moen et al., 1992). Indeed, patterns of late-life adaptation and aging are generally linked to the formative years of life course development.

By studying lives over substantial periods of time we increase the potential interplay of social change with individual development. Though longitudinal studies are often long-term projects, very few provide the necessary data on contextual changes over time, including changes in residences and socioeconomic conditions. The availability of geo-codes with coordinates that locate households on a map for users of large data sets now enables an increasing number of studies to assess environmental changes and their impact on individual lives. Greater opportunities exist to collect data on lives and their changing environments, including relationships, workplaces, schools, and communities.

2. *The Principle of Agency: Individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance*

Children, adolescents, and adults are not passively acted upon by social influence and structural constraints. Instead, they make choices and compromises based on the alternatives that they perceive before them. For example, workers' values influence work experiences, including the rewards and characteristics of jobs like pay, autonomy and service to others (Johnson, 2001a; Mortimer & Lorence, 1979). Inner-city families provide another example of this phenomenon. These families live in difficult circumstances and often struggle with poverty and crime, but many parents actively manage their children's environments to minimize their risks, by joining churches and signing children up for youth programs (Furstenberg et al., 1999). Parents' involvement in their children's schooling is structured to some extent by their resources and the school's openness to their participation, but also reflects their assessments of whether their children need their involvement (Crosnoe, 2001).

The planning and choice-making of individuals, within the particular limitations of their world, can have important consequences for future trajectories. Clausen (1993) has argued, for example, that adolescents' "planful competence" furthers their educational and occupational attainments. By their self-confidence, intellectual investment, and dependability, which together define planfulness, adolescents can "better prepare themselves for adult roles and will select, and be selected for, opportunities that give them a head start" (Clausen, 1993, p. 21).

But planfulness and its behavioral expression depend on context and its constraints. In the older cohort of California men in the Lewis Terman sample (born 1900–1911) for example, most men had completed college before 1930 and consequently, entered a labor market that soon became stagnant in the financial crisis of the 1930s. Their dismal chances in the labor market led them back to school, acquiring advanced degrees (Shanahan & Elder, 2002; Shanahan, Miech, & Elder, 1998). By contrast, the younger men (born 1911–1920) were engaged in finishing secondary school and college through most of the 1930s, a time span that was long enough for them to acquire attractive jobs as the economy improved through wartime orders. The teenage planfulness of the younger men predicted a relatively stable and

successful life course—in advanced education, in maintaining their marriages, in civic involvement, and in life satisfaction. However, teenage planfulness in the older cohort revealed very little about their future lives.

3. *The Principle of Time and Place: The life course of individuals is embedded and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime*
Individuals and birth cohorts are influenced by historical context and place. As Gieryn (2000) observes, a place possesses three essential features: geographic location; a material form or culture of one kind or another; and investment with meaning and value. The Chinese Cultural Revolution was a political movement in such a place, extending as it did from 1966 to 1976. A number of Chinese youth had their life trajectories drastically altered by this revolution. "Sent down", separated from their families and communities, forced into manual labor, a good many of these young people were changed by their experiences at the time. In this way they were set apart from young Chinese of adjacent birth cohorts and those of similar age who were not sent down to the country side (cf. Zhou & Hou, 1999).

The same historical event or change may differ in substance and meaning across different regions or nations. World War II provides relevant examples of this point. The immediate postwar years were deprivational in many parts of Europe, unlike the prosperity of the United States, and war experiences entailed widespread suffering among veterans and civilians. Using a retrospective life history method, Mayer (1988) found that German men, born between 1915 and 1925, were almost universally involved in the armed forces. These men lost as many as nine years of their occupational careers in the war, and many of the 75% that survived the war could not find employment afterward. The cohort of 1931 also suffered widespread hardship in the war that disrupted their families and schooling. The devastated economy made stable employment illusory for many. Even the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s did not fully compensate this younger cohort for its war-related losses in occupational advancement.

4. *The Principle of Timing: The developmental antecedents and consequences of life transitions, events, and behavioral patterns vary according to their timing in a person's life*
The same events or experiences may affect individuals in different ways depending on when they occur in the life course (George, 1993). The very meaning of the event can change at different developmental stages (Wheaton, 1990). For example, Harley and Mortimer (2000) find that very early transitions to adult statuses, like leaving the parental home at a relatively young age, entering marriage or a cohabiting relationship, and becoming a parent, have detrimental effects on mental health. Moreover, the young people in their panel study who became parents early and who experienced a "pile up" of transitions (multiple transitions in the same year) experienced poorer mental health, compared to young people who experienced a "pile up" without early parenthood. These differential experiences in the transition to adulthood explain the emergence of a socioeconomic gradient in mental health in early adulthood through cumulative advantages and disadvantages.

The social and developmental implications of life course timing help to explain why two birth cohorts from the 1920s were affected so differently by life in the Great Depression (Elder, 1974, 1999). Born at the beginning of the 1920s, the Oakland Growth Study children were not as susceptible to the effects of family hardship and disruption as their younger counterparts in the Berkeley Guidance Study (birth dates in the late 1920s). The Oakland children were also too young to be exposed to the harsh labor conditions of a depressed economy. If we think in terms of a developmental match between these children and their environment,

the best fit applies to the Oakland Study members. The particular timing of prosperity, depression, and war, placed the two birth cohorts on different developmental pathways.

A similar perspective applies to the time at which men and women have entered the military service. An early transition to the service, before the establishment of families and careers, has the potential to minimize life disruptions, and even enhance life chances through early skill training and leadership experience, the formation of life goals, and post-service education through the GI Bill. From this perspective, early entry provides the best fit between the recruit and his or her social world, notwithstanding the risk of combat and injuries or death. Consistent with this account, the Berkeley boys from hard-pressed families tended to rise above the disadvantage of their childhoods by entering the service at relatively young age (Elder, 1974, 1999). Later entry resulted in more life disruptions and fewer benefits. Sampson and Laub (1996) also obtained such results in their longitudinal study of low-income youth from Boston who entered World War II.

5. *The Principle of Linked Lives: Lives are lived interdependently and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships*

Often, individuals are affected by larger social changes through the impact that such changes have on their interpersonal contexts within more micro-level settings. The Iowa farm crisis illustrates this principle (Conger & Elder, 1994). Economic hardship affected child development in negative ways largely because it increased the depressed feelings of parents. A second part of this study (Elder & Conger, 2000) revealed the positive developmental influence of joint activities and shared responsibilities among youth with their families.

The initiation of new relationships can shape lives as well, by fostering "turning points" that lead to a change in behavior or by fostering behavioral continuity. Sampson and Laub (1993), for example, found that marriage and employment helped turn troubled young men toward more conventional lives by providing a network of individuals to reinforce conventional behavior. Not surprisingly, Simons and his colleagues (2001) found that the effects of these social networks depend on whether the activities of the individuals involved were conventional or anti-social. Because friend and mate selection tends to follow the homophily principle, the crucial factor for youth with delinquent histories is managing to circumvent this tendency and form relationships with more conventional individuals.

Because lives are lived interdependently, transitions in one person's life often entail transitions for other people as well. In a study of African American families, Burton and Bengtson (1985) found that a daughter's early transition to motherhood, and therefore her own mother's early transition to grandparenthood had repercussions for their roles, responsibilities and social identities. The new mothers still thought of themselves as children and expected their mothers to help care for their child. This expectation seldom materialized because the new grandmothers felt too young for the grandmother role. Women who have their own children early in life frequently also enter the grandparent role at an early age, generating feelings of being "older" than their agemates (Neugarten & Datan, 1973).

These five principles steer research away from age-specific studies and towards the recognition of individual choice and decision-making. They promote awareness of larger social contexts and history and of the timing of events and role change. They also enhance the understanding that human lives cannot be adequately represented when removed from relationships with significant others. Allowing these principles to guide inquiry promotes the holistic understanding of lives over time and across changing social contexts.

The basis of the life course principles, and the ideas underlying them, emerged over a period of decades. Examples of life-span thinking before 1900 provide an orientation to the

first principle, that human development and aging are life long processes. In a sense, it represents a definitional premise of the theoretical orientation's scope—that the temporal span of study extends from birth to death and draws upon research on development and aging across the life span (see Featherman, 1981). To our knowledge, the other principles first appeared in a paper by Elder (1994), which was based on his Cooley-Mead Award presentation at the American Sociological Association (1993), in Miami, Florida. In preparing for this event, Elder surveyed studies of the life course and some key premises of the research. Thus, the principle of human agency depicts the role of the individual as an active force in constructing his or her life course through the choices and actions taken. With this point in mind, it is not surprising that the principle has characterized life history work dating back to the 19th century (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918–1920).

The multiple meanings of age in theory brought time and temporality to life course thinking and study, especially during the 1960s (Neugarten, 1996). Age and time also helped to place individuals and cohorts in their social and historical contexts (Riley, Jonson, & Foner, 1972). The principle of linked lives refers to the social embeddedness of lives and has its origins in role theoretical accounts of life histories and lives that date back to the 19th century (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918–1920). This principle represents an early theoretical approach to individual lives, as seen in applications of the life cycle concept or model.

The fifth principle on historical time and place derives much of its richness from the emergence of social history and from such early studies as *Children of the Great Depression* (Elder, 1974, 1999). When times change, lives change. *Children of the Great Depression* illustrates and documents all five principles. Most of the principles also address issues of contextualism by placing people in context.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

At the dawn of the 20th century, social research was uninformed by a concept of the life course. By the end of the century, however, life course theory had truly come of age. It has been used and adapted to research needs by sociologists, psychologists, and historians, among others, who are interested in a variety of research questions. Psychologist Anne Colby notes the "tremendous impact on social science that the life course approach has had in the past three decades" (1998, p. xiii), concluding that "the establishment of this approach, which is widely shared internationally as well as across disciplines, is one of the most important achievements of social science in the second half of the 20th century" (p. x). This slow, yet dramatic, change of events has its origins in the improvement of research and data collection as well as changes in history, population, and geography.

Developments of this kind have drawn upon theories of social relations (e.g., role theory and the concepts of life cycle and generations), aging research, and developmental psychology. In turn, these areas have been enriched by the life course approach. For example, contemporary research on social relations, manifested in the study of social networks, social capital, and attachment, has often failed to locate people in time and place, but it has become more common in these areas to explore historical *and* ecological context, such as differences between the inner-city and rural communities.

Finally, life span developmental psychology has begun to incorporate the importance of social context and individual variation while adding a sociological understanding of individual development and aging (see Heckhausen, 1999). New thinking about the meaning of aging has provided a correction to aging research by focusing on the link between age and

time. Birth year locates people in historical context and age places them in a particular stage of life, while age also indicates the timing of lives and documents whether an event or transition occurs relatively early or late.

What are the most promising frontiers in studies of the life course? In this flourishing field, a number of frontiers could be noted. Consider, for example, the challenge of crossing levels of analysis and the many important unknowns that remain. Multiple levels of the life course provide research opportunities for investigating their interplay over time. Structured or institutionalized pathways establish a context in which people make choices, plans, and initiatives regarding their lives—they construct their lives within the constraints of established pathways in a culture, organization, or community. Social change may alter routine pathways and the life trajectories of individuals, thereby changing in some manner their developmental course. Thus drastic income loss in the 1930s changed the daily pattern of family life and the life experience of children (Elder, 1974, 1999). Later on, mobilization for war changed or delayed future options.

Each level can be thought of as a defining point of entry for study. Some sociological research centers on the macroscopic level of social institutions and population aggregates (Mayer, 2001). Other studies focus on the individual life course and its trajectory over time. A third type of study investigates the behavioral development of the individual and pays no attention to its contextual environment. The study of multiple levels of the life course requires interdisciplinary research, including contributions from psychology, anthropology, history, economics and biology.

Theories and methods have centered largely on specific levels thereby increasing the challenge in bridging levels, from the macro to the micro level. To date, the growth of multilevel studies (see Furstenberg et al., 1999) has given fresh visibility to cross-level research, as in studies of neighborhood and school effects, but it has made little contribution to an understanding of lives. These studies typically provide only a skeletal view of the life course.

Individual development and aging generally occur in a changing world that can be indexed with an age-graded life course. Techniques for analysis (hierarchical linear and latent growth models) provide a way to investigate such contextual effects over time, but our purview should extend to the interacting contexts themselves in which people live their lives. Children, for example, live in neighborhoods, particular communities, and attend certain schools. They are members of distinctive families and friendship groups. In a short-term longitudinal study of early adolescents, Cook and his associates (2002) found that the multiple contexts of their lives (schools, neighborhoods, peers, and families) had independent and additive influences on adolescent success (see also, Call & Mortimer, 2001). Cumulative disadvantages or advantages tend to maximize the contextual influences. We need lifelong studies of the young adult and late-life adult that also assess their multiple contexts, including those of family, workplace, and community or neighborhood.

Lastly, the growth of longitudinal studies among advanced societies, in particular, offers an opportunity for studies of the life course that take seriously the principle of historical time and place. The very same birth cohort is certain to have varied historical and cultural experiences in different societies. Strategic comparative studies of the life course are needed to reveal the trajectory of life patterns in societies that differ in political regime, welfare state policies, and the centralization of government. Blossfeld and Dröbnic (2002) provide an example of such work in their anthology of studies that focus on the careers of couples in contemporary societies. However, such research seldom crosses levels of analysis by investigating the developmental and aging effects of life patterns.

At this time, the life course is primarily viewed as an age-graded sequence of socially defined roles and events that are enacted over historical time and place. This view comes with

the understanding that changes in the life course of individuals have consequences for development and that historical change may alter the life course and developmental trajectories by recasting established pathways. By drawing on life course theory, contemporary researchers can situate the processes by which social change influences and alters the developmental paths of young and old. The five paradigmatic principles discussed in this introduction (development and aging as lifelong processes, human agency, lives in historical time and place, social timing, and interdependent lives) provide the most concise, yet inclusive, conceptual map of life course theory. This map enables studies of the life course to build upon a wider network of cross-disciplinary scholarship that emphasizes the role of time, context, and process.

In this chapter we describe the "life course" of life course theory and life course research that is currently in the middle of a vibrant adulthood. The following handbook chapters show the vitality that characterizes this field of scholarship today.

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