

CHAPTER 30

Reflections on the Future of the Life Course

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The notion that the life course is both biologically based and also socially and culturally constructed can be traced back to a number of theoretical traditions in sociology and psychology in the early part of the last century (Mannheim, 1944; Thomas, 1937), while efforts to develop a theory of the life course began several decades later with the writings of C. Wright Mills (1959), Norman Ryder (1965), and Riley, Johnson, and Foner (1972) in sociology and Bernice Neugarten (1968) in psychology. These ideas were promoted and advanced by a variety of researchers in the 1970s and 1980s among them Glen Elder (1974, 1975), Tamara Hareven (1978), Modell, Furstenberg, and Hershberg (1976; 1989), Karl Ulrich Mayer (1991), Hagestad and Neugarten (1985), Walter Heinz (1996), and many others. With new methods and longitudinal data sets, life course research came of age in the last several decades and is now an established theoretical perspective in sociology and developmental psychology as is attested to in this volume.

The aim of this chapter is to speculate about the future of the life course and at the same time imagine what new developments might emerge in life course theory and research. This is a tall order in part because these two objectives are not inevitably linked together. I will begin with the first task of thinking about future trends in the social organization of the life course, which will lead me to make some observations about needed advances in theory and research.

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CONSIDERING THE PAST, APPROACHING THE FUTURE

This volume is not the place to review how the life course has changed or how the social and cultural construction of its form has been altered by economics, demography, history, and technology. Others have addressed these large issues in this volume and elsewhere in other publications (Buchmann, 1989; Heinz, 1996; Settersten, 1999; Weyman, 1996). It is probably sufficient to say that theories of the life course generally assume that cultures construct the life course differently, and that these cultural conceptions are in turn affected by historical, economic, and institutional forces. These dynamic models of ideal life course scenarios affect the distribution of actual life course patterns in ways that regulate, at least to some degree, the pace and process of human development in any given society. But it is also the case that contingencies created by historical circumstances, economic realities, and social constraints mean that individuals, separately and collectively, depart from accepted timetables, which ultimately alter cultural conceptions.

This rather abstract preamble cries out for an illustration. Consider the ways that childhood—a stage of life itself—that has not always been highly differentiated is being changed in developing societies as economic demands make the work of children less valuable and require increased educational investment in human capital (Coleman, 1988; Zelizer, 1985). Or in advanced societies, youth as a stage of life is being elongated and elaborated for much the same reasons: young people cannot become highly committed to work until they complete their education and training, which increasingly extends well into their third decade of life (Arnett, 2000; Brown, Larson, & Saraswathi, 2000; Furstenberg, 2000, 2002; Larson, 2002). Thus, life course scripts, as C. Wright Mills (1959) recognized many years ago, are a lens for observing the intersection of personal biography and history. And, Mills shrewdly observed that individual difficulty in conforming to social expectations relating to marriage, work, and parenthood often represent unresolved cultural contradictions; contradictions resulting from the clash between norms about the life course and the exigencies of everyday life that prevent people from behaving as they think that they should or even as they might desire. We see this today in America in many inner-city neighborhoods where men and women would like to marry but do not have the cultural and economic resources to manage matrimony (Edin, 2000; Furstenberg, 2001; Waller, 2002; Wilson, 1996).

To imagine a future life course involves, then, thinking both about how expectations might change—resulting in new social expectations about life scripts—and also foreseeing how constraints on behavior might create widespread violations of current norms that would shift cultural models of how lives ought to be organized. Quite an impossible task, but that is the nature of most futurological writings. I have approached this particular exercise in futurology by imagining how the life course might change along lines of four of the main pillars of sociological analysis: gender; race and ethnicity; social class; and age.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE LIFE COURSE

Mounting evidence suggests that gender differences in the organization of the life course have been diminishing for the past several decades in most Western nations (Bianchi & Spain, 1986; Mason & Jensen, 1995). Schooling, home leaving, independent living, marriage timing, and the age at first birth appear to be converging across gender in ways that make men

and women's life courses more similar than they were at the beginning or the middle of the last century (Fussell & Furstenberg, 2002). At the same time, women's lower economic standing, due in part to their higher probability of living outside of marriage and their greater longevity, persists and may be widening. Will these sources of difference override the general pattern of convergence that we are seeing in the population at large?

The answer, I suspect, is that we may see two simultaneous trends regarding gender in the next several decades. Overall, gender differences may continue to decline in the United States in the timing of transitions, but we may also see that the divergence will continue to occur in particular subgroups. Here is how it could work: Among children of privilege and those in the middle-class, gender differences could diminish in the structuring of the life course. Girls and boys, men and women will operate on a more equal footing in the opportunities for health, schooling, work, and family life they are afforded. This is not to say that gender disparities will disappear, but they will follow the trend of the late 20th century and diminish over time.

To be specific, we might expect to see that girls will converge with boys in school achievement during high school and college; the two sexes will gain greater parity in the workplace, and age differentials in marriage and the timing of first birth will continue to decline within the top third or perhaps even the top half of the population. Women with means may opt out of the labor force during part of their childbearing years, but they will make up the time lost by a later age of retirement than men.

These general trends toward greater parity between men and women may be more complex when we examine the situation of lower-income Americans, especially disadvantaged minorities. Relative to boys, girls are gaining ground faster in education—or boys may actually be losing ground while girls are holding their own in school achievement, employment, and earnings. Among African-Americans and Puerto Ricans, the situation of low-income men has been steadily deteriorating while there is some evidence that women are holding their own (Hauser, Brown, & Prosser 1997; Mare, 1995). As a consequence, men and women are finding it more difficult to form lasting partnerships. Power relationships between men and women, always a delicate issue at the bottom of the social order, have been complicated by the relative decline in economic and perhaps social status of men. I do not foresee this trend abating in the near future unless less-educated and low-income men adopt middle-class ideals about gender equality. The problems of the declining fortunes of lower-income males undermine the family formation patterns at the bottom of the social structure, fostering high rates of non-marital childbearing and family instability (Cherlin, 1992). Tensions between men and women, that I have elsewhere referred to as the “culture of gender distrust,” will persist unless we devise programs to incorporate less advantaged males more successfully in schools and the labor market (Furstenberg, 1995; 2001).

ETHNICITY AND RACE

The huge increase in ethnic diversity resulting from immigration and higher rates of fertility among native born African-Americans and second-generation immigrants in the latter decades of the last century will surely continue into this century though the pace of diversification may slow down as immigration is more tightly controlled. Nonetheless, America has reclaimed its heritage as a nation of immigrants: several states now have or are approaching levels at which a majority of children are born to first- or second-generation immigrants or native-born minorities (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). If the composition of these newer cohorts is changing, can we expect to see more variation in the life course than was the case in the past century?

If historical precedence holds true, it is more likely that immigrants will quickly become “Americanized,” that is adopt the prevailing patterns of the dominant population. Certainly, there is some evidence that over time second and third generations of many ethnic groups become more and more like those whose families have been living in the United States for many generations (Harris, 1999). This does not mean that variation will not be evident among ethnic and racial groups but rather that it will gradually diminish with acculturation to American institutions. This has certainly been the case in educational attainment, the timing of marriage and parenthood, fertility levels, and the like. Even if this is generally the case, we might expect to see certain groups lose their ethnic distinctiveness sooner than others, depending on such conditions as access to opportunity and discrimination as well as the strength of ethnic cultures.

I am prepared to make a bold prediction, perhaps even reckless by historical standards: racial barriers, an ugly hallmark of American society, will gradually disappear during the course of this century. Blacks, long held back by explicit discrimination, have been relegated to a lower-caste position in the United States along with Native Americans. Both legal changes in the second-half of the 20th century and greater access to educational opportunities are gradually eroding the longstanding pattern of racism.

Racial segregation in marriage, schooling, employment, and labor market patterns, and housing all contributed to the maintenance of a sharp dichotomy between black and white Americans (Farley, 1995; Massey & Denton, 1993). I foresee changes occurring in each of these areas, albeit at a different pace. Inter-marriage has been rising and is likely to continue to do so, and, confounding the racial classification of families, white parents are adopting a greater number of black children. Segregated schooling and housing continue to undermine opportunities for Blacks, but the tipping points establishing white flight in schools or neighborhoods that set off hyper-segregation may be not quite as low as in the past. In any case, Americans may be becoming more tolerant of inter-racial proximity in part because shades of color are becoming more prominent.

If this scenario sounds overly optimistic, I should add that I do not expect the changes to occur in dramatic fashion but foresee instead a gradual erosion of racism much as what took place among the Irish or Jews, groups once considered separate racial categories. The conversion of racial distinctions to ethnic differences would represent an enormous contribution to what William J. Wilson (1996) once referred to as the “declining significance of race.” In part, Wilson expected that racial barriers would increasingly become class differences in much the same way that I described the complex interactions between gender and social class above.

We know relatively little about the varying life course patterns of foreign and native-born Americans today. As I will note in the next section, this is a topic ripe for future research. In any case, we can be quite confident that interest will grow in the next decades. Certainly, scholars are not going to be satisfied to work with simple classifications of White, Black, and Hispanic. Already, we can see that self-definitions are more complex than publicly imposed classifications in vital records or census data (Zuberi, 2001).

SOCIAL CLASS

Countless studies have shown that the most powerful determinant of life course patterns is not gender or race/ethnicity but social class (Farley, 1995). Interestingly, however, social class is a less salient topic in social science research than it was a half century ago even though there is strong evidence that inequality has grown. Americans understand that wealth or the lack of it affects opportunities, but rich and poor believe that they are in the middle class, and, with

some notable exceptions, class differences are almost regarded as distinctions that are politically incorrect. We speak of inequality but not class position as if economic differences were a continuous variable. In fact, the literature accumulated a generation ago, suggests rather sharp and qualitative differences across the social spectrum owing to the strong inter-correlation of education, employment, income, and life style. As I have argued elsewhere, class position permeates the life course from birth to death (Furstenberg, 2001). Since its effect generally accumulates over time, it is strongly implicated in health, education and employment, leisure, and, especially, family life.

Contrary to my prediction that the significance of gender, race, and ethnicity will diminish in decades to come, current evidence suggests that class differences that are now relatively invisible may become more prominent in structuring the life course in the 21st century—unless, of course, policies to counteract this trend are put in place. Since the 1970s, inequality in American society has been growing. The economic stagnation of the 1970s and 1980s affected the bottom two-thirds adversely, especially those with low education and skills. The college educated saw increases in income while the rest of the population barely held their own or declined (Levy, 1988). In the 1990s, the more disadvantaged part of the population experienced real gains in the booming economy, but so did the very wealthy (Mishel, Bernstein, & Schmitt, 2001). The economic disparity between the top and the bottom quintiles is huge and is likely to grow in the first decade of the 21st century.

The unequal flow of economic resources in returns to education and skills is not offset by redistribution policies as occur in most other Western nations. In practical terms, this means that the State does very little to counterbalance the effects of the market economy on individuals and families. If families cannot afford pre-school programs, health insurance, after-school activities, tutoring, counseling, and other amenities purchased by affluent families, then children must suffer the consequences. In addition, families with means can provide more cultural capital—knowledge about how the system works, interpersonal skills, and symbolic resources that foster social mobility—and social capital in the form of connections, sponsorship, and normative support. The boundaries of social class may actually be tightening as children may be growing up in more class-segregated communities and schools now than a generation or two ago.

In fact, this hypothesis of the impact of growing inequality on social class distinctions has not been subjected to empirical examination. But if it is true, we might expect to discover large class differences in both expectations and behavior in the social timetables of growing up and growing older. Also, we might anticipate much less predictable or orderly careers in the negotiation of age-graded transitions such as schooling and entrance to the labor force, marriage and childbearing, and retirement. I would expect to see greater variability in life course patterns and transitions among children and youth in the bottom two-thirds of the population than among the affluent. A recent paper by Ellwood and Jencks (2001) on patterns of marriage and family formation shows that the declines in marriage, marital stability, and non-marital childbearing almost exclusively occur among the less educated two-thirds of the population. These findings provide some support for my predictions, but this area of class-related change is ripe for more research.

As we suggested above, social class crosscuts distinctions in gender, race, and ethnicity. The largest differences in life course patterns are likely to occur in marginalized groups that also lack economic resources. Consequently, we are likely to see the greatest variability among African-American or Puerto-Rican lower-class males and the least among non-Hispanic White males and females (Kmec and Furstenberg, in press). In other words, sociological analysis of life-course patterns by social class must also take account of how class intersects with gender, race and ethnicity.

AGE

As Matilda Riley and her colleagues (1972) were among the first to theorize, age is a source of stratification in every society. Age groups benefit or lose out in the distribution of resources because of political and cultural attitudes (resulting in public policy), historical circumstances, and demographic conditions that affect growth and attrition. Over the past half century, we have seen vast changes take place in the economic position of the elderly resulting from changes in social security, voting patterns, educational attainment, and increases in life expectancy because of health care and medical technology. At the same time, fertility has sharply declined, reducing the number of families with children and the time that adults spend in households with children. At a macro-level, the burden placed on the relatively small number of working adults has been growing as benefits to the elderly have increased along with the proportion of their share in the population (Preston, 1984). Children and young adults have probably lost out in the competition for economic resources. This competition for resources is most acute in Western European nations with very low rates of fertility (Sgritta, 1994). But all nations with a high proportion of elderly are likely to face a dilemma in how to share public expenditures between dependent children and dependent elderly.

The generational competition for resources has consequences for the timing of life course transitions because children are making greater demands on their parents for support as the age of attaining economic independence is becoming later in all societies with advanced economies (Furstenberg, 2002). The growing burden on parents may be a factor in declining fertility as parents do not wish to take on the private costs of childbearing for more than one or two children (if any at all). And, as indicated above, fertility declines further reduce the public's willingness to share the costs of childbearing (Fussell, 2002). This pattern is likely to be most evident in societies, like the United States and Italy, that spend relatively little public funds on children and which expect parents to assume the major share. If I am correct, the relatively high rate of fertility in the United States because of the contribution of immigrants and low-income families may not continue indefinitely. Our relatively early age of marriage and childbearing has contributed to the high level of fertility. As marriage drops off and non-marital childbearing becomes more costly for mothers and fathers, we may expect to see a declining rate of non-marital childbearing. (This does not mean that the ratio of non-marital to marital fertility will also drop; it will only do so if non-marital births decline faster than marital births.)

The response of many parents will be to devote a greater share of their resources to a lower number of children because children have become of more symbolic and emotional than material value to their parents. Parents with high levels of education are becoming ever more discriminating in their parental strategies aimed at producing "thoroughbred" offspring. The tendency in the United States to regard parenting responsibilities as sacred is likely to increase as parents attempt to build human, cultural, and social capital both inside and outside the family. Parents are likely to delay childbearing until they have more means to consume on children; and, when they have children, they will spend more and more on them in response to what they perceive to be other parents' consumption patterns. Thus, children are becoming the ultimate consumer good, contributing to greater inequality as wealthy parents have much more to spend than those with limited means. Moreover, wealthy parents have been more successful at controlling family size than poorer parents. A smaller number of children are, as a consequence, receiving a high proportion of the total dollars spent on children. Time-use studies suggest that these same children are probably receiving a greater share of time as well as money (Bianchi, 2000). This suggests that the difference in the skills of well-off children as compared to poor children might grow over time.

One correlate of this prediction is that the age of economic dependency of children may lengthen because children require more investment in their third decade of life owing to the extension of education. The period of youth or semi-autonomy, common in the 19th century, is reappearing as the transition to adulthood spans the 20s and even early 30s (Furstenberg, 2001).

At the other end of life, greater longevity may result in far more differentiation of what is currently "old age." Pressures to support children in early adulthood may keep some parents in the labor force longer. The early ages of retirement, now common in Western European countries, may give way to greater demands on younger seniors to remain in the labor market if pensions decline and responsibilities to children continue. In any case, the increasing health differentials between individuals in their late 60s and early 70s and those in the late 80s and early 90s are likely to lead to distinctions among the elderly. Just as we invented terms like adolescents or the teen years, so too could I imagine that we will devise terms to distinguish the young, middle, and older seniors (see Moen, *this volume*). Is it far-fetched to believe that cohort solidarity might develop among these sub-groups of elderly based on shared experiences in the past or life-style patterns in the present?

NEW METHODS IN THE STUDY OF THE LIFE COURSE

The stock of empirical knowledge about the life course grew tremendously in the second half of the 20th century, providing a goldmine of information for social historians accustomed to fragmentary materials and demographic data. Social surveys, longitudinal studies, and qualitative accounts of growing up will provide a rich archive of data for future historians and social scientists with an historical bent. One of the likely advances now being pioneered in both historical and contemporary research is record linkage across data sets, using census and survey information with public records such as vital statistics or employment data. As more data are computerized and software in record linkage advances, the possibilities will grow for combining data sets and sources to build longitudinal records or augment longitudinal studies with public record information. The problems of doing so are likely to result not from technological but ethical concerns.

Similarly, there is a strong movement for linking qualitative and quantitative data. Once a choice in data collection approaches, more and more researchers are being trained, so to speak, to work with both hands. I see this pattern continuing with the greatest methodological breakthroughs coming when researchers can crosswalk between intensive qualitative interviews and survey data that contains information on parallel issues. As yet, we have not invented ways of analyzing these sources of data using similar techniques. I am confident that breakthroughs will occur in the next couple of decades that will allow researchers to overcome this methodological obstacle. If I am correct, we will certainly see more attention to the ways that objective changes in life circumstances or anticipated and unanticipated transitions or turning points may alter subjective states and personal identities. The possibilities of examining developmental changes in parallel with sociological and demographic shifts in situation and context will be much enhanced if we are able to capitalize on the strengths of qualitative and quantitative data in the same study.

It is remarkable how little cross-national research currently exists on the life course considering the widespread interest in this perspective across the developed and developing world (Larson, 2002; Raffaelli & Larson, 1999). Economic and technological forces producing more global communication and commerce have not yet resulted in many truly collaborative

cross-national studies on the life course. There is a growing tendency to replicate similar study instruments in different countries, but truly comparative data collection designs are rare. This will surely come, but real advances require international institutes of research with international funding. Collaboration across government offices often results in parallel studies that do not produce truly comparative research.

On the horizon are new technologies for studying life course events. The advent of the web, cell phones, and beepers has produced clever small-scale studies that do not always require traditional modes of data collection. However, these methods are potentially as intrusive as interviews even if they sometimes bypass some of the limitations of data collected through interview techniques. No doubt, researchers will devise means of gathering data with technologies that are more playful or, at least, less burdensome or evocative of self-consciousness. The rapidly developing surveillance industry is likely to produce new and, no doubt, controversial techniques for collecting unobtrusive information on individuals and families.

Bio-medical and biological developments will also offer new modes of inquiry for life course researchers. Formidable ethical problems must be overcome to make full use of potential genetic and hormonal determinants and consequences of life course patterns or intergenerational links. Yet, social scientists, sociologists in particular, who have long resisted studying the biological bases of social systems may be beginning to appreciate that nature versus nurture is no longer a tenable formulation. It would be surprising not to see advances in understanding how biology is implicated in the unfolding of life course patterns.

CONCLUSION

In the early 1980s, my colleague Andrew Cherlin and I published a paper entitled “The American Family in the Year 2000” (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1983). Looking back on this exercise, some of our speculations turned out to be correct and very few were really wrong. What was dismaying, however, is how much we missed altogether because of our limited ability to foresee important changes like technological developments that allowed for novel developments in work and family. We were far better at predicting the continuities than the discontinuities in demographic trends. In other words, we could extrapolate reasonably well based on current trends, but we had little success in making creative leaps that involved the possibility of the unexpected.

There is no reason to believe that I have been any more adept in this chapter at imagining changes in the life course much beyond what is already visible on the horizon. What I am most confident of is that a half century from now—long after this book is being read by more than a few curiosity seekers—scholars will still be considering the forces that structure and organize the life course, and trying to speculate about changes that are likely to occur in the coming decades.

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