

The Life Course and Aging: Some Reflections

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Studies of adult development and aging in the 1960s called for a new way of thinking about lives and development from birth to death. Today, “life course theory” is providing one such perspective. The evolution of this framework owes much to the “continuing challenge” of research on aging. I would like to address this dialectic in my presentation.

When I accepted my first job at the University of California-Berkeley in 1962, I found much concern over how to study adult lives. My assignment involved work with John Clausen on longitudinal studies that had been ongoing since the 1920s. The study members had been exposed to rapid social change, and I was struck by the developmental implications of this changing world. I wondered whether people develop and age in different ways when they live different lives.

At the time, the Institute of Child Welfare (now called Human Development) housed three pioneering longitudinal studies — the Oakland Growth Study of Californians born in 1920-21, the Berkeley Guidance Study with members born in 1928-29, and members of the Berkeley Growth Study, also born in 1928-29. In the early 60s, the Study members were in their late 30s and early 40s. How did they make it to middle age? Did they go into the military, into college? What kinds of careers did they pursue? And what about the impact of social change?

The Institute archives became a formative influence in my thinking about the life course — largely through the task of coding data on the Study members. Coding is a tedious enterprise, but it also generates new research questions. The data did not always match the questions we were pursuing, and this disparity eventually led us to “recast” the archival materials by developing new

codes (Elder, Pavalko, & Clipp, 1993). I left this project with a perspective on human lives over time.

Ten years after leaving Berkeley for Chapel Hill and the University of North Carolina, Matilda Riley invited me to join her SSRC Committee on Life Course Perspectives. Over its life of ten years, this committee became a powerful force in the field of life course studies and in my own thinking. Both life course scholarship and life-span developmental psychology were represented on the committee, and I puzzled over the connections between the two traditions. And I still do.

Now some thoughts on the relation between adult development and the life course.

Studying Adults and Life Course Theory

Extension of the early child samples to the adult years gave renewed momentum during the 1950s and 60s to the scientific study of adult development. And it sharpened awareness of the need for a different research paradigm, one that would focus more attention on human development beyond childhood and adolescence. Up to the 1970s, most Berkeley Institute studies had been limited to correlational patterns between measures in childhood and adulthood (Jones, Bayley, Macfarlane, & Honzik, 1971). The intervening years remained a “black box,” open to speculation, not scientific understanding.

There were many reasons for a limited perspective on the study of aging. Financial support was scarce and the idea of adult development had not as yet captured the imagination of

behavioral scientists. However, this did not restrict the Berkeley studies from continuing into the middle years.

A visitor to the Institute during the early 70s would have discovered a follow-up underway (1972-73) across three generations — the Study members, their parents, and offspring. Jack Block, a psychologist, had completed an important study of personality continuity and change from early adolescence to the middle years, entitled *Lives Through Time*, 1971. And I had just written *Children of the Great Depression* — based on the lives of the Oakland Growth Study sample. The two projects were a study in contrasts. I tried to put lives in context while context mattered not at all to Jack. Nearby at Stanford University, a research team headed by Robert Sears was actively following members of the Lewis Terman sample of talented children into their later years. This was the oldest active longitudinal study at the time, with birth years extending from 1900 to beyond 1920.

The 1970s witnessed the extraordinary growth of national longitudinal studies of both adults and children, from the Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics to the National Longitudinal Surveys. In Great Britain, three nationwide longitudinal studies were underway from childhood to the adult years, with birth dates of 1946, 1958, and 1970.¹ But these efforts are mere ripples when compared to the number of longitudinal studies launched in the 80s and 90s — truly “an age of longitudinal research.”

At the Berkeley Institute and elsewhere, investigators were handicapped by child-based models in their continuing research on Study members across adulthood. Their limitations posed challenges that have fostered life course thinking and appropriate methods (Elder, 1998; Giele & Elder, 1998): (1) to formulate life-span concepts of development and aging; (2) to conceptualize

how human lives are socially organized and evolve over time; and (3) to relate lives to an ever-changing society, with emphasis on linking processes and mechanisms.

Responses to the first challenge led to the formulation of new life-span concepts of development and aging (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998) and especially to the field of life-span developmental psychology. Some processes are discontinuous and novel, while others are continuous and cumulative. Biological resources tend to decline over the life span, whereas cultural resources may increase, as in the growth of wisdom. Theorists stress the life-long interaction of person and social context, the relatively plasticity and agency of the aging organism, and the multidirectionality of life-span development (Lerner, 1991). Psychologist Paul Baltes at the Berlin Max Planck Institute is a leading figure in programmatic efforts to study development and aging across the life span. And the Berlin Aging Study (Baltes & Mayer, 1999) is one of his major empirical contributions to knowledge.

This phase of life-span thinking on human development occurred with little attention to a well-established “relationship” view of human lives. Dating back to the 19th century, the social sciences have viewed human lives in terms of multiple role sequences and their transitions (Cain, 1964; Kertzer & Keith, 1984) — a role theoretical approach. Concepts of generation, socialization, and life cycle are central to this framework (Clausen, 1972).

Within this tradition, life cycle theory helped to contextualize people’s lives by emphasizing the social dynamic of “linked lives.” The life cycle model offered a valuable way of thinking about the social patterning of lives, but it lacked temporality. It did not locate people according to their historical time or life stage in the course of aging. Role sequences could occur

at different points in the life course. During the 1960s, the life cycle model was modified and elaborated by new understandings of age and its relation to time or temporality.

These understandings came from greater awareness of substantial variation in the age patterns of events. Contrary to established views at the time (Eisenstadt, 1956), people of the same age do not move in concert across major events and transitions. In addition, social relations and kinship emerged as a primary source of variation and regulation of life trajectories. A third discovery centered on historical change as a factor in life-course variation.

Studies of social change and life patterns had been conducted up to the 1960s as if they had little in common. This practice was challenged by Norman Ryder's (1965) concept of the interaction of individual lives and history; and then by Matilda Riley in *Aging and Society* (1972). Ryder proposed the term "cohort" as a concept for studying the life course according to the age at which the person enters the system. With its life stage principle, Ryder's essay provided a useful point of departure for understanding the interaction between social change and the life patterns of birth cohorts.

Looking back to *Children of the Great Depression* (Elder, 1974, 1999), I now realize that the study drew upon all three strands of life course theory. Life-span concepts of development were devised to apply across the life course and its stages, such as transition, coping, and adaptation. The meanings of age brought a perspective on "timing" to the study, and enabled me to identify the consequences of relatively early and late events, from marriage to worklife. From the life cycle tradition, the concept of "interdependent lives" enabled me to understand how Depression hardship influenced children through multiple family relationships. And it proved useful in thinking about intergenerational continuities and change, role transitions and sequences.

Age distinctions were needed to locate people in history and birth cohorts, and to mark the transitions of life.

Over time, life course theory has forged a conceptual bridge between aging processes, the social trajectories of the life course, and ongoing changes in society, one based on the premise that age places people in the social structure and in particular birth cohorts. To understand this conceptual bridge, it is useful to distinguish among three levels of the life course and their interplay over a person's life:

- (1) institutionalized pathways and social aggregates, defined by established state actions and policies, organizations, and dictates of the market;
- (2) the personal life course that is formed by the individual's own choices and constraints, frequently in terms of a career or trajectory; and
- (3) the developmental or aging trajectory of the individual, defined, for example, by intellectual functioning, self-efficacy, or values.

Models of the Life Course and Aging

I have noted that life course theory owes much to the emerging field of aging, to its conceptual and methodological needs. I use the term "theory" by following Robert Merton's (1968) discussion on varieties of theory. Some references to the life course make use of the term approach or paradigm; others use perspective, model, or framework. After following such practices for a while, I realized that these terms generally belong to the category of a theoretical orientation. In its most general expression, life course theory defines a common domain of inquiry

with a framework that guides research in terms of problem identification and formulation, variable selection, and strategies of design and explanatory analysis.

A number of theoretical principles offer guidance for research on aging. One captures a fundamental shift away from “age-specific studies” to research that extends across phases of the life course. It is the principle that human development and aging take place across the entire life span. This principle was stated many years ago by Matilda Riley in *Aging and Society* (with Johnson & Foner, 1972); by Paul Baltes in his writings on life-span developmental psychology; and later by David Featherman’s (1983) synthesis of the life-span literature. Adolescent, mid-life, and old age behavior cannot be fully understood by focusing solely on the specific life stage in question. (1) **Human development and aging are life-long processes**

Increasingly, we are recognizing that preventive measures for health in the later years require knowledge that can only come from programmatic life-course studies of early influences and behavior patterns (Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). For example, exposure to traumatic experiences in the early years may accelerate an age-related decline of immuno-competence in later life, as suggested by the morbidity and mortality effects of wartime experience (Elder, Shanahan, & Clipp, 1997). Studies of aging that begin with adults in their 50s or 60s do not have the developmental record of the prior years.

And these developmental records are essential in building explanatory accounts of behavioral continuity and change. According to Caspi and Bem (1990) three types of interaction between person and situation are relevant to such accounts. Proactive interactions refer to the process by which people select rewarding or compatible environments. Consider mate selection. Caspi notes that “by choosing situations that are compatible with their dispositions and by

affiliating with similar others, individuals may set in motion processes of social interchange that sustain their dispositions across time and circumstance” (Caspi & Herbener, 1990, p. 250). Duane Alwin’s Bennington alumni research (with Cohen & Newcomb, 1991) suggests that these women selected college environments that matched their beliefs; later they married men with similar values who sustained their belief continuity into the later years.

Reactive and evocative interactions refer to other mechanisms of behavioral change and continuity. In the case of reactive interaction, people encounter the same objective situation but interpret and respond to it differently. Contrasting adaptations eventually produce different life trajectories, as in the case of war resisters and military inductees during the Vietnam War (Hagan, in process). Evocative interaction refers to the process by which an individual’s behavior, appearance, or personality elicits distinctive responses from others. Each of these interpersonal mechanisms are part of the process by which disadvantages and advantages cumulate over the life course.

Despite compelling arguments for life-long “longitudinal studies,” matters of cost and time have always favored research on aging which is based on samples of adults in their later years. The mature cohorts of American adults in the National Longitudinal Surveys and the Health and Retirement Survey are two examples of this type of sample. Another example is the Berlin Aging Study of people over the age of 75 (Baltes & Mayer, 1999).

However, the pressing need for greater understanding of historical change and behavioral pathways to the later years has persuaded us to think about ways of extending longitudinal studies of children, adolescents, and young adults. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and the National Study of Adolescent Health are two prime candidates for extension to the later years.

Symptomatic of the present intellectual climate, the Center for Disease Control at Atlanta has recently requested applications for longitudinal studies of early adolescents, noting that the study proposal should have plans for extension into later life.

Related to a life-long concept of aging is the principle of timing which asserts that:

(2) The developmental antecedents and consequences of life transitions, events, and behavior patterns vary according to their timing in a person's life. The age-graded life course entails many changes in social roles, tasks, and settings. And such change also takes place in the biopsychological aging of the individual. As a whole, these variations and changing contexts give rise to “a pattern of time-varying influences across the life course.”

Sources of emotional depression illustrate this perspective. There is an SES gradient in emotional depression, but sources of depression vary over the life course. From the young to middle age, emotional depression is linked to SES through low education and mastery (Miech & Shanahan, in press). In late life, impaired physical health and low income emerge as prominent factors.

Such variation has been neglected. Indeed, “the configuration” is more often assumed to be invariant across stages of the life course. Consider the SES gradient in health. When Adler and her associates (1994) assembled a broad range of evidence on this gradient, they did not look for variations across the life span. And they reported no evidence that the relationship between SES and health might vary over the life span, or that the causal mechanisms might vary as well.

Evidence is accumulating on the differing pattern of influence by the timing of key life transitions — leaving home, entering and completing college, entering the work role, the transition to marriage and first child, separation and divorce, and retirement. Different influences

reflect different life histories and their consequences for the transition experience. Consider the meaning of divorce at 25 versus divorce at 55.

Do accelerated life transitions foster a sense of being old or older than one's peers? Some people enter major roles in late adolescence, while others follow a pattern of late entry, especially into family roles. We found that accelerated transitions have their greatest effect on a subjective sense of being old or older when they possess general meaning on "becoming old." An early age of "becoming a grandparent" proved to be the most important source of "feeling older" among white midwesterners. The later the transition, the less these men and women perceived themselves as feeling older than peers.

Normative expectations identify appropriate times for most transitions, for leaving home and one's retirement. These expectations also reflect the behavioral consequences of being early, on-time, or late. Consider the normative model for military service which focuses on the period after high school. Manpower demands in World War II drew men into the service over a 20 year period — some were 18 and others were 38. Mobilization after high school minimized disruption of the recruit's life, coming before major life commitments. However, late mobilization (after the age of 32) became a disruptive experience for men, disrupting their marriages, careers, and friendships.

The timing of lives has much to do with "social synchrony" and the principle of linked lives which states that: **(3) Lives are lived interdependently and social-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships.** We are alerted to the social embeddedness of human lives through ties with kin, friends, and co-workers across the life span (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Social regulation, support, and tensions are transmitted through these

relationships. The misfortunes and opportunities of adult children become intergenerational as well as personal matters. Each generation experiences fateful decisions and events in the other's life course.

Asynchrony between lives is vividly expressed through off-timed reproductive events. Children are born to “children” in early adolescence and to women over the age of 40, an age spread of more than 25 years. Both of these intergenerational events are prominent in contemporary populations, among the disadvantaged and advantaged. Later childbearing, in the 30s or later, ensures greater material resources for the child and the positive qualities of childrearing may increase as mother's age at birth increases. However, a wide age gap may lessen feelings of closeness and shared activity.

The “relationship” implications of differential timing are illustrated by Burton's (1985) provocative doctoral study of three generations of African Americans in Los Angeles. Teenage parenting had ripple effects that extended into the third generation. Mother became a grandmother before “her time” and grandmother became a “great grandmother.” In most cases, the young teenage mothers expected their own mothers to help care for their child. However, this expectation never materialized in four out of five cases. In large part, the young mothers felt they were too young to become a grandmother. The dynamics of timing clearly have consequences for linked lives.

The dynamic of linked lives has a broader scope than the older life cycle tradition, with its focus on parenting. Examples of this scope include (1) the interdependent trajectories of an individual — in relating family and work roles, and in linking social roles to the trajectory of human development or aging; (2) the linked lives of friends and family in a life-long convoy (Kahn

& Antonucci, 1980); and (3) the linked trajectories of couples or dyads, connecting family and work roles.

As late as the mid-70s, studies of work and family were largely following their own independent course, with little interaction (see Elder, 1977). The growth of dual career families since then has given greater priority to such interaction. And life course theory has provided a useful framework for this dynamic of “interlocking” roles and lives, including an emphasis on their timing and the synchronization (O’Rand, Henretta, & Krecker, 1991). Multiple roles have developmental value (Moen, Dempster-McClain, & Williams, 1992), and studies have demonstrated the long-term payoff of this life history in late-life outcomes of health and longevity.

In their study of late-life men and women, Han and Moen (1999) investigated what they call “coupled careers” from the 30s to retirement. They identified five work careers (delayed-entry, orderly career, fast-track, steady part-time, and intermittent), related the husband and wife versions, and connected both to the reported quality of the marital career. By combining all of these life patterns, the authors were able to identify types of families and their consequences for the quality of later life.

Not surprisingly, men in this birth cohort tended to follow a more standardized career, and this career was frequently combined with a steady part-time career for wives, along with marital satisfaction on the part of both spouses. Orderly and fast-track careers for men produced the greatest disparity on marital satisfaction — wives were dissatisfied, men satisfied.

One of the distinctive contributions of life course study involves the concept of life stage, the individual’s temporal position within the life course, as indexed by age and social roles. Life stage determines the personal implications of social change. As each birth cohort encounters an

historical event, whether war or peace, depression or prosperity is, as Norm Ryder put it, “distinctively marked by the career stage it occupies” (Ryder, 1965, p. 846). In this manner, the principle of life course timing specifies a mechanism by which history affects how people age. The principle of historical time and place states that: **(4) The life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime.**

The full significance of this life course principle occurred for me when I compared the young adolescent experience of the Oakland Study members with that of youth who were born a decade later. The Oakland children encountered Depression hardships after a relatively secure phase of early childhood in the 1920s, and they left home after the worst years of the 1930s for education, work, and family.

This life pattern differed strikingly for children who were born at the beginning of the 1920s. They experienced Depression hardship at a young age and thus were most vulnerable to family disruptions. But historical experience also differed within each birth cohort; some children were exposed to drastic income loss, while others encountered more modest hardship or none at all. As Dannefer (1987) has observed, historical heterogeneity within cohorts is a key source of heterogeneity in cohort aging. Our analyses show the Berkeley children were more adversely influenced by the economic collapse than were the Oakland adolescents, especially the boys.

Cohort heterogeneity is most evident in the World War II experiences of California men in the Lewis Terman study of talented adults, all born between 1900 and the 1920s. Over 40 percent of the men were mobilized into the Armed Forces despite an average age in 1941 of 30 years, and another 24 percent were mobilized into critical war industry. Drawing on work underway, we find that employment in war industry exposed men to short-term benefits in rapid career mobility and

skill development, whereas military service exposed them to long-term consequences — to the traumatic effects of combat and reduced longevity, as well as accelerated career advances following service in the officer corps. These life course patterns varied some by cohort, but in each cohort they produced diverse life careers.

Today we find that studies of the life course are more attentive to historical change. Prominent examples include the work of Mayer (1988) and colleagues in Germany which has assessed the impact of World War II and postwar conditions on men's and women's worklives, including the effect of reunification. Mayer found that German men, born between 1915 and 1925, were almost universally involved in military action — about 97 percent of the age cohort. The cohorts lost as much as nine years of their occupational career in the war. They suffered a high rate of imprisonment during and after the war, and experienced a mortality rate of 25 percent. German children born around 1930 were also hard hit by the war years. The war disrupted their families and education, and they entered the labor market in a war-devastated economy. Work placements were often poor, mixed with spells of joblessness, and advancement was unpredictable. Even the economic boom after the deprivational years of recovery did not fully compensate this younger cohort for its wartime losses in occupational advancement.

Other excellent examples include Sampson and Laub's study of World War II effects in the lives of American men from low-income communities (1996), McAdam's study of Freedom Summer in the Civil Rights Movement and its life history consequences (1989), and Zhou's (with Hou, 1999) recent study of the sent down generation in the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

All of the life course principles enumerated up to this point are relevant to studies that investigate change in the life course and aging. For example, timing and linked lives define

mechanisms through which an event or change makes a difference. Other mechanisms include the accentuation of individual differences in social transitions and the restoration of personal control through behavioral adaptations.

This brings me to the last principle, the human agency of people's choices that construct their life course, even in time of great disadvantage. Concepts of human agency have always been prominent in life history studies (see Haidt & Rodin, 1999), and they are also common in studies that relate individuals to the broader social context. The agency of individuals and their life choices ensures some measure of "loose coupling" (Elder & O'Rand, 1995) between social transitions and life stages. The principle of human agency states that: **(5) Individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances.**

In *American Lives*, John Clausen (1993) viewed young men and women from the Berkeley studies as people who constructed their lives through the choices they made. He focused on planful competence in adolescence. Competent young people who think about the future with a sense of personal efficacy are more effective in making sound choices and in implementing them. He found that such young men were most likely to achieve a successful start through education, occupational careers, and family. And this beginning anticipated accomplishments across the life course, even into the sixth decade.

However, planfulness may produce little difference in the life course when present and future are disrupted by social change. The Berkeley youth experienced the prosperous postwar years and many took advantage of educational benefits from the G.I. Bill. The war came early in their lives, and consequently led to minimal life disruption. By contrast, the older Terman men

who left college for work in the 1930s also faced military duty during the war. These men (birth cohort, 1900-1910) hit both the Depression and war years at “an untimely point” in their lives, and they followed a path of life-long disadvantage into the later years, when compared to the younger men (Elder & Chan, in press). Planful competence in the adolescent years of these older men did not make a positive difference in their lives, as it did for younger men.

Reflections on New Frontiers

Ever since the 1960s, the social sciences have witnessed an interactive relationship between the emerging field of adult development and the theoretical coalescence of life course ideas. I have attempted to provide one account of this dialectic, noting the pressing theoretical needs of the early longitudinal studies and some research directions on aging that reflect life course principles. When child development studies from the 1920s and 30s were extended into the adult years, this design called for conceptual models of the life course, from childhood to the later years. A primitive version of life course theory evolved in this context, borrowing concepts and distinctions from relationship theories, age-based models of lives, and life-span developmental psychology.

This dialectic reflects the systemic development of life course study. The key elements are theory and data, methods, research questions, and empirical results. Life course theory defines a context for empirical inquiry and it does so by identifying relevant problems and variables (Merton, 1968, p. 142). Unexpected empirical findings and the discovery of new data (in longitudinal studies, etc.) have influenced both research questions and life course theory. In turn,

new questions and theoretical distinctions have accelerated the development of new statistical techniques and research designs.

Advances in the field of life course and aging identify at least four frontier themes.

First — for many years, theory has depicted the life course in terms of interlocking trajectories, social, biological, and psychological. Advances in statistical techniques are enabling studies to model this process — with latent growth curves, hierarchical linear models, etc.

Second — we speak of changing lives in changing times. Advances in the measurement and assessment of multi-level contexts suggest that we will see studies that investigate this dynamic over significant portions of the life course. The task is especially challenging when the time frame spans 30 or more years. Cross-national collaboration in the design of longitudinal studies indicates that we will also see more projects of this kind.

Third —the integration of qualitative and quantitative data in multi-level studies of the life course and aging. This is an exciting endeavor and development.

And, fourth — more research is studying biological as well as social and psychological influences on aging. The study of biomarkers is a central part of this research advance.

All of this seems very promising. However, breakthroughs in any field come from the new questions that are posed, questions that force us to look at familiar territory through a different lens. What will these questions be in the 21st century?

Endnotes

1. The practice of investing in the continuation of original “child development” samples has been embraced by funding agencies in Great Britain. Three nationwide longitudinal samples of children were established in 1946, 1958, and 1970. All three samples have been followed into the adult years, and plans have been established to extend them into the later years of life. The 1946 sample has been followed up at age 53, the 1958 sample at 41, and the 1970 study at 29. The two younger cohorts are located at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education, University of London, London WC1 HOA.

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