

## CHAPTER 1

# The Emergence and Development of Life Course Theory

GLEN H. ELDER Jr.

MONICA KIRKPATRICK JOHNSON

ROBERT CROSNOE

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

---

GLEN H. ELDER, JR. • Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27516-3997. MONICA KIRKPATRICK JOHNSON • Department of Sociology, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington 99164-4020. ROBERT CROSNOE • Department of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712-1088.

*Handbook of the Life Course*, edited by Jeylan T. Mortimer and Michael J. Shanahan. Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York, 2003.

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



<http://www.springer.com/978-0-306-47498-9>

Handbook of the Life Course

Mortimer, J.T.; Shanahan, M.J. (Eds.)

2003, XX, 728 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0-306-47498-9