

# Critique of the life course perspective



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The life course perspective is a theoretical model that has been developing over the last 40 years across several disciplines. It is intended to look at how chronological age, common life transitions, and social change shape people's lives from birth to death. Sociologists, anthropologists, social historians, demographers, and psychologists have all helped to give it shape.

The life course perspective also draws on traditional theories of developmental psychology. However, this perspective differs from these psychological theories in one way. While developmental psychology looks for universal, predictable events and pathways, the life course perspective calls attention to how historical time and the person's culture affect the individual experience of each life stage.

## LITERATURE REVIEW OF MAJOR THEMES

In 1994, Glen Elder identified four dominant themes in the life course approach: 1) interplay of human lives and historical time, 2) timing of lives, 3) linked or interdependent lives, and 4) human agency in making choices.

The literature for these themes is reviewed below, along with two other related themes that Elder and Michael Shanahan have recently identified as important: 1) diversity in life course trajectories and 2) developmental risk and protection.

### Interplay of Human Lives and Historical Time

As sociologists and social historians began to study individual and family life pathways, they noted that individuals born in different years faced different historical worlds, with different options and limitations. They suggested that

historical time may produce group effects, which occur when social change affects one group differently than it affects following groups. For example, Elder's (1974) research on children and the Great Depression found that the life course of the group that were young children at the time of the economic downturn were more seriously affected by family hardship than the group that were in middle childhood and late adolescence at the time. Analysis of large data sets by a number of researchers provides evidence for this as well (e. g., Cooksey, Menaghan, & Jekielek, 1997; Elder, 1986; Rindfuss, Swicegood, & Rosenfeld, 1987; Shanahan et al., 1998).

### Timing of Lives

In this theme, scholars have researched ages at which specific life events and transitions occur. They may classify entrances and exits from particular statuses and roles as “ off-time” or “ on-time,” based on social norms about the timing of transitions (George, 1993). For example, childbearing in adolescence is considered off-time in modern industrial countries, where as it is seen as on-time in many preindustrial societies.

Dimensions of Age. Chronological age itself is not the only factor involved in the timing of

lives. Age-graded differences (formal social organizations based on age) in roles and behaviors are the result of biological, psychological, social, and spiritual processes. It should be noted however, that life course scholars have not directly addressed the issue of spiritual age. So, in this theory age is often considered from each of the perspectives that make up the biopsychosocial framework (e. g., Cavanaugh, 1996; Kimmel, 1990;

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Settersten & Mayer, 1997). To gain a better understanding of age regularities and irregularities in life course paths, researchers have studied the order in which life events and transitions occur (George, 1993). Most of the research has been on the entrance into adulthood, specifically focusing on the completion of school (Hogan, 1978, 1981; Modell, Furstenberg, & Hershberg, 1976; Settersten, 1998; Shanahan, Miech,& Elder, 1998). Life course scholars and researchers also are interested in the length of time that an individual or family, spend in a particular state, without changes in status or roles. Some would make the conclusion that, in general, the longer we experience specific environments and conditions, the more likely it is that our behavior will be affected by them (George, 1996).

Finally, life course scholars are studying the pace of transitions. Transitions into adult roles in young adulthood (such as completing school, leaving home, getting the first job, getting married) appear to be more rapidly timed than transitions in middle and late adulthood, such as retiring or losing parents (Hareven, 1978, 2000).

#### Linked or Interdependent Lives

The life course perspective emphasizes the interdependence of human lives and the ways in which relationships both support and control. In research, attention has been paid to the family as a source of support and control.

Links Between Family Members. Elder's longitudinal research of children raised during the Great Depression found that as parents experienced greater economic pressures, they faced a greater risk of depressed feelings and marital conflict. As a result, their ability to nurture their children was

weakened, and their children were more likely to show signs of emotional distress, academic trouble, and problem behavior (Elder, 1974). This connection between family hardship, family nurturance, and child behaviors is now well established (e. g., Conger, Elder, Lorenz, Simons, & Whitbeck, 1992; Conger et al., 1993). It should also be noted that parents' lives are influenced by the pathways of their children's lives. Older adults and their adult children are also interdependent. The pattern of mutual support between older adults and their adult children is formed by life events and transitions across the life course (Hareven, 1996). It is also changed when families go through historical disruptions such as wars or major economic downturns. It is also disrupted in immigrant families when the children pick up the new language and cultural norms faster than the adults in the family and take on the role of interpreter for their parents and grandparents (Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999).

Links with the wider world. Researchers know a lot more at this point about the ways that individuals and their multigenerational families are interdependent than about the interdependence between individuals and families and other groups. However, it can be noted that work has a major effect on family transitions (George, 1993). Using data for 6 and 7-year-old children from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, researchers found that the children's depression and aggressive behavior were not associated with whether their mothers were employed but rather with the type of work those mothers did (Cooksey et al., 1997). Children whose mothers are in occupations requiring complex skills are less likely to be depressed and

behave aggressively than children whose mothers are in less skilled work environments.

The family seems to have much more influence on child and adolescent behaviors than the neighborhood does (Elder, 1998; Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999; Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, Gordon, & Chase-Lansdale, 1997). More differences in the behavior of children and adolescents have been found among families in a given neighborhood than have been found when comparing the families in one neighborhood with families in other neighborhoods. There is evidence, however, that the neighborhood effects may be greater for children living in high-poverty areas (Katz, Kling, & Liebman, 1999).

#### Human Agency in Making Decisions

Social historians have attempted to correct the traditional focus on lives of elites by studying the lives of common people (Hareven, 2000). By doing so, they discovered that many groups once considered passive victims—for example, working-class people, actually took independent action to cope with the difficulties imposed by the rich and powerful. Historical research now shows that couples tried to limit the size of their families even in preindustrial societies (Wrigley, 1966), that slaves were often ingenious in their struggles to hold their families together (Gutman, 1976), and that factory workers used informal networks and kinship ties to manage, and sometimes resist, pressures for efficiency (Hareven, 1982).

However, human agency has limits. Individuals' choices are constrained by the structural and cultural arrangements of a given historical era. Unequal

opportunities also give some members of society more options than others have. Elder (1998) notes that the emphasis on human agency in the life course perspective has been aided by Albert Bandura's work on the two concepts of self-efficacy and efficacy expectation, or expectation that one can personally accomplish a goal.

### Diversity in Life Course Trajectories

A good indication of the diversity of life course pathways is found in an often cited study by Ronald Rindfuss and colleagues (Rindfuss et al., 1987). They examined the sequencing of five roles: work, education, homemaking, military, and other, among 6,700 men and 7,000 women for the 8 years following their high school graduation in 1972. The results suggested that men's life course pathways are more rigidly structured, with fewer disruptions, than women's. Some researchers in the life course perspective would say that the explanation for this gender difference is that women's lives have been more strongly interwoven with the family domain than men's, and the family domain operates on nonlinear time, with many irregularities (Sattersten & Lovegreen, 1998). They go on to suggest that men's lives are more firmly rooted in areas outside the family, such as the work world, and these areas operate in direct time. Men's and women's life pathways have started to become more similar, but this is primarily because women's schooling and employment patterns are moving closer to men's, and not because men have become more involved in the family domain (Sattersten and Lovegreen, 1998).

Research also suggests that the family life pathways in minority groups in the United States are different from the family life pathways of whites. Minority youth tend to leave home to live independently later than white youth do, at least in part because of the high value put on “ kinkeeping” in many minority cultures (Stack, 1974). However, in a random sample from a major urban U. S. city, minority respondents gave earlier deadlines for leaving home than white respondents when questioned about the appropriate age for leaving home-even though the minority respondents actually left home at a later age than the white respondents (Sattersten, 1998).

Another source of diversity in a country with immigration is the individual experience leading to the decision to immigrate, the journey itself, and the resettlement period (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999; Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999). The individual’s decision to immigrate may involve social, religious, or political persecution. The resettlement experience requires establishment of new social networks, may involve changes in socioeconomic status, and presents serious demands for assimilating to a new physical and social environment. Gender, race, social class, and age all add layers of complexity to the migration experience. Family roles often have to be renegotiated as children out perform older family members in learning the new language. (Fabelo-Alcover, 2001).

### Developmental Risk and Protection

As the life course perspective has continued to evolve, it has more clearly emphasized the links between the life events and transitions of childhood,



adolescence, and adulthood (Shanahan, 2000). Studies indicate that childhood events sometimes shape people's lives 40 or 50 years later (George, 1996).

The long-term impact of developmental experiences was the subject of the earliest life course research, Glen Elder's (1974) examination of children from the Great Depression. He compared a group of Oakland children who were born in 1920 and 1921 with a group of children he referred to as the Berkeley children, who were born in 1928 and 1929. The Oakland children experienced a relatively stable and secure childhood before they encountered the economic crisis of the Great Depression during their adolescence. They also made the transition to adulthood after the worst of the economic downturn. The Berkeley children, on the other hand, experienced early childhood during the worst years of the Depression. When they reached adolescence, their parents were involved in World War II, with many fathers away in military roles and many mothers working long hours in "essential industry." Although both groups experienced economic hardship and later difficulties in life transitions, the Berkeley children were more negatively affected than the Oakland children.

Elder has recently stated that the idea of developmental risk and protection as a major theme of the life course perspective. Other life course scholars have suggested that it is not simply the timing and sequencing of hardships but also their duration and spacing that provide risk for youth as they make the transition into adulthood. For instance, poverty alone is much less of a risk than extended poverty. Life course scholars have borrowed the concepts of cumulative advantage and cumulative disadvantage from sociologist

Robert Merton to explain inequality within groups across the life course (Bartley et al., 1997; O’Rand, 1996). Merton found that in scientific careers, large inequalities in productivity and recognition had accumulated.

Researchers and scholars propose that cumulative advantage and cumulative disadvantage are socially constructed; social institutions and societal structures develop mechanisms that ensure increasing advantage for those who succeed early in life and increasing disadvantage for those who struggle (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998).

The life course perspective and the idea of cumulative disadvantage is beginning to influence the study of the prevalence of disease across communities (e. g., Brunner, 1997; Kellam & Van Horn, 1997; Kuh & Ben-Shlomo, 1997). Researchers in this tradition are interested in social and geographical inequalities in the distribution of chronic disease. They suggest that risk for chronic disease gradually accumulates over a life course through episodes of illness, exposure to unfavorable environments, and unsafe behaviors. They are also interested in how some experiences in the life course can break the chain of risk.

This approach to public health mirrors efforts in developmental psychology and other disciplines to understand developmental risk and protective factors (Fraser, 1997; Rutter, 1996; Werner, 2000). The study of risk and protection has led to an interest in the idea of resilience, which refers to the ability of some people to fare well in the face of risk factors. Researchers studying resilient children are examining the interplay of risk factors and protective factors in their lives. Although the study of protective factors lags

behind the study of risk factors, researchers speculate that a cumulative effect will also be found for protective factors (Fraser, 1997).

## STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

As a framework for thinking about human behavior, I think that the life course perspective has several advantages over other theories of human development. These advantages include the greater attention to the impact of historical and social change on human behavior, the emphasis on linked lives, and the acknowledgement of people's strength and their capacity for change.

The attention that the life course perspective places on the impact of historical and social change on human behavior is important because of our rapidly changing society. The life course perspective differs from other psychological theories in this way. An example of this is Elder's 1974 research on children and the Great Depression. He found that the life course of the group that were young children at the time of the economic downturn were more seriously affected by family hardship than the group that were in middle childhood and late adolescence at the time.

Not only was that true about the generations that were affected during the Great Depression but it's true today. In my own family, behaviors such as not throwing away any food, face to face communication, serving others, trusting strangers, and respect are important to my grandparents and parents generation. In contrast, my generation has placed value on being self-reliant, having impersonal communication (texting, instant messaging), wasting resources, and not respecting people. I believe that things like social

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networking sites (facebook, twitter), less parent improvement, and more portrayal of violence and language in movies have played a significant role in the shifting of values. It has definitely been a major social shift between my grandparents generation and my generation.

The second strength of the life course perspective is the emphasis that it places on the interdependence of human lives and the ways in which relationships both support and control an individual's behavior. First of all, I believe that parents' and children's lives are linked. Support for this idea is seen in Elders 1974 research on children of the Great Depression as well. He found that as parents experienced greater economic pressures, they faced a greater risk of depressed feelings and marital discord. Therefore, their ability to nurture their children was compromised, and their children were more likely to exhibit emotional distress, academic trouble, and problem behavior.

I also think that parents' lives are influenced by the their children's lives. For example, parents may need to alter their work schedules or career goals to respond to the needs of a sick terminally ill child or parents may forgo early retirement to assist their young adult children with education expenses. This does not change as the child develops into an adult. The pattern of mutual support between older adults and their adult children is formed by life events and transitions across the life course. For example, the traditional pattern of intergenerational support (parents supporting children) is often disrupted if one generation migrates and another generation stays behind.

Again I believe that differing patterns of social networks in which persons are embedded produce differences in life course experiences (as experienced in

my own life). The intersection of multiple pathways (the family lifeline, the educational lifeline, and the work lifeline) introduce new possibilities for diversity in life course patterns.

The final strength of the life course perspective is the acknowledgement of people's strength and capacity for change. I think this because in studying other traditional theories of developmental psychology, they look for universal, predictable events and pathways. The life course perspective, however, calls attention to how historical time and the person's culture affect, influence, and change individual experience at each life stage. I view many of the traditional developmental models as stage theories of development that rest on the assumption that development is a discontinuous process that involves distinct stages which are characterized by qualitative differences in behavior.

With that said, I believe that there are two major weaknesses in this perspective: 1) the failure to adequately link the micro world of individual and family lives to the macro world of social institutions and formal organizations and 2) studying heterogeneity or the quality of being diverse and not comparable in kind.

The first weakness or limitation of the life course perspective is the failure to adequately link the individual and family lives to social institutions and formal organizations. Although it does place emphasis on linked lives and interdependence as one of the core themes, it does not have clear evidence to prove the link to macro systems. By not being able to do this effectively I

think that they have left out a component that plays a part in determining human behavior.

The other weakness in this perspective is the issue of heterogeneity. Even though heterogeneity can be seen as a very positive aspect of the life course perspective I think that it also creates one of the biggest challenges and can become a major weakness in the area of being able to search for patterns of general behavior. I see this as a problem because in countries such as the United States, where there are high levels of heterogeneity it may be hard to discern certain general behaviors. For example the individual experience leading to the decision to immigrate to the U. S., the journey itself, and the resettlement period. The individual's decision to immigrate may involve social, religious, or political persecution, war, or a dangerous political environment. If you are observing this group of immigrants, they are so different in experience that they will most likely not reveal any general pattern of behavior.

#### HOW THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE RELATE TO THE CHRISTIAN WORLD VIEW

Although the life course scholars have not paid much attention to spirituality I think that there are some aspects of the perspective that relate to a Christian world view. This includes the ability to change and being interdependent.

I believe that the acknowledgement of people's capacity for change can be related to the Christian idea of human beings being transformed by God. " He continues to re-form and re-shape us, from what we have been in this

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world into the image of His Son,” (Isaiah 64: 8). In my own life I can think of several examples of Christ reforming me and re-shaping me from what I was becoming. These examples include hardships that I have endured that have made me a stronger person, failures (or at least that is how I saw them) being turned into something better than I could have ever imagined, and presenting me with unexpected opportunities that I would have probably never tried.

The other aspect that relates to a Christian world view is our lives being interdependent or in a Christian view, being in community. Acts 2: 44-47 states “ All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone, as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.” The first believers had real spiritual needs that led them into fellowship with others. As they came into this fellowship of other believers with the same needs, they naturally bled on one another. Togetherness in Christianity is important because it is encouraging and in fact, Jesus calls us to fellowship together. This relates back to our interdependent lives and that we rely on each other more than we think. We tend to form groups with people that are like us and that have the same needs as us. It is important for us to remember that lives are also linked in systems of institutionalized privilege and oppression just as they are in a church.