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The Life Course Reader

Individuals and Societies Across Time

campus READER

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1. General Introduction

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Overview

The life course approach is today a core research paradigm in the Social Sciences. As a proper methodological basis for the analysis of social processes, it denotes an interrelationship between individuals and society that evolves as a time-dependent, dynamic linkage between social structure, institutions, and individual action from birth to death.

In the centre of the life course approach is the fact that "time matters" (Abbott 2001), because aging is a sequence of life phases and transitions that is constructed in a reciprocal process of political, social and economic conditions ("historical time"), welfare state regulations and provisions ("institutional time"), and biographical decisions and investments concerning shifting living circumstances ("individual time"). In view of the multi-temporal relationships between living and working conditions, cultural models, social policy, and individual plans as well as actions, the analysis of modern life courses requires a research strategy that comprises social structure, institutions, and personality on the one side, and longitudinal designs applying relevant quantitative and qualitative methods on the other side.

Life course research illuminates how structural and institutional changes affect human lives because it presents theoretically elaborated and empirically grounded investigations into the interrelationship between individuals and society across time. Moreover, it is based on a conceptual and theoretical perspective which invites interdisciplinary efforts to create an integrated social theory. Since its explicit introduction into sociology by Leonard Cain in 1964 (reprinted in Chapter 2), the life course paradigm has become a flourishing field of interdisciplinary research of international scale. Social anthropology, social and cultural history, sociology, political science, gerontology, and social and developmental psychology all contribute to a better understanding of the interrelationships between individual- and social aspects of the processes and phases of aging. These fields respond to the advances in life course studies. Whereas the early definition of the life course by Cain (1964) emphasized the (orderly) sequence of social statuses as a result of aging, today's definitions take

into account the interdependency of aging, human agency, historical time and place, linked lives, and the biographical timing of events and transitions (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe 2003).

The high degree of complexity of life course patterns and biographies poses a great challenge to the parsimony demanded by the ideal of an integrated social theory. However, the life course approach offers tools to bring this complexity under control through providing categories, concepts, and methods needed for the task.

This collection, providing an overview of life course research over the last four decades, will show both how big the challenge of a multi-level, dynamic analysis of social processes is and what the life course approach offers for mastering it. The collection focuses on the interrelationships between social, economic, cultural, and political change and life courses as well as biographies in modern society.

Theorizing the Life Course

The life course is a configuration of social and individual components which develops over time. Its complexity is due to at least three kinds of interdependence (cf. Marshall and Mueller 2003; Mayer 2004; Huinink and Feldhaus 2009).

First, there is an interdependence of the past, the present, and the future, and thus a path dependence of the life course. Actors learn from the past (though not always with sound conclusions) and are bound to their decisions, which restricts current action and future planning by means of established rules, habits, selective information, and more generally, the transaction costs brought about by innovation. Furthermore, actors are committed to a range of social relationships which create obligations. Since there are life phases of particular bearing for the shaping of biographies, such as status passages from school-to-work or transitions from employment to retirement, actors try to anticipate the potential outcomes of actions for their further living circumstances, including for their social relationships.

Second, there is an interdependence between different spheres of action which constitute the multi-dimensionality of the life course. This refers foremost to the fields of family, education, work, leisure and retirement. These are life domains in which individual action and development are embedded. In regard to the life course, these fields compete for resources (such as time and cognitive focus), although activities in various fields can also be combined with each other, as is the case with part-time employment and child rearing or with lifelong learning and work.

Third, there is a multi-level interdependence between individual action and political-economic, social, and cultural contexts, which are also interrelated as structural conditions of individual action. Since life course patterns are embedded in macro-social structures and cultural beliefs and guided by market opportunities, institutions, and social networks, their multi-level investigation is critical for explicating the social mechanisms by which societal change modifies opportunities, creates risks, and influences biographies. When social scientists analyze the life course, they focus on historical conditions and events (e.g. economic cycles, wars) and institutional arrangements (e.g. educational systems, labor markets, welfare provisions) insofar as they influence the individual shaping of biographies. However, the supra-individual structure is ultimately the aggregate result of individual choices and actions during the life course (Coleman 1990), to be thus explained by the social construction and symbolic representation of reality and by the figurations created through expanding markets and the democratization of public choice and governance.

The level of personality characteristics (self-identity) is also involved, since individual action and decision-making are implied in the shaping of biographies. In the wake of a revision of the childhood-centered theories of socialization, micro-analyses of the life course show that personality develops through an active process of coming to terms with living circumstances and changing physical and mental capacities (Staudinger and Lindenberger 2003; Heinz 2002).

These three principles of interdependence highlight the complex task that life course researchers are confronted with, but at the same time, they can guide the spelling out of hypotheses about life course dynamics which take into account that social structure, markets and life course policy, and biographies are an ensemble that is constituted across historical, institutional, and individual time. First, one can elaborate these principles on the fairly abstract level of markets, policy, science, and technological modernization in order to show how they constitute a structure and process in their own right, with a specific dynamic. Second, one can explore the extent to which it is possible to explain life course transitions and trajectories in different welfare regimes, institutional settings, and social classes by historical and cross-cultural comparative research into the institutional dynamics of efficiency and the ecological appropriateness of particular organizations. Third, and on a more applied side, one could show how the consequences of globalization and modernization impact the future shape of life course patterns and individual biographies of actors and how variations in life course policy matter for social integration and the quality of life.

Life course literature offers concepts and hypotheses at three levels of the interrelationship between individuals and society: social, economic, and population (age) structures on the macro-level; institutions, organizations, and social

networks on the meso-level; and personality, socialization, and biographical action on the micro-level. It also offers much regarding the close interplay between different domains of the life course.

Investigating the life course also means to focus on three dimensions of time: historical, institutional, and individual time and to analyze the biographical consequences of the "loose coupling" (Elder and O'Rand 1995, reprinted in Chapter 17) between life chances, social policy, and aging. Analyzing continuity and change of life courses within and between cohorts thus implies the illumination of the effects of age, cohort, and historical events on the rhythms of individual lives.

Social Change and the Life Course

Several sociological and social-psychological approaches have been put forth for explaining how social structure and biographies are interrelated by time-dependent processes. These approaches focus on the discovery and specification of social mechanisms that are linking historical conditions and events, life chances, welfare policy, institutional arrangements, population dynamics, socialization processes, and individual decision making across time (see Weymann and Heinz 1996; Settersten 1999; Moen et al. 1995; Mortimer and Shanahan 2003; Heinz and Marshall 2003; Mayer 2004, Shanahan and Macmillan 2008).

Modernization has laid the ground for growing opportunities for conducting an individualized life liberated from communal bonds ("Gemeinschaft") as well as for the continuing rationalization of specialized institutions tailored to all segments and sequences of the life course. Sociological scholars of the life course approach agree on major trends of social change over the past fifty years and their effects on individual life courses. Advanced modernization, meaning the currently ongoing transformation of the industrial society into a service and knowledge society, has modified female and male biographies due to at least three major changes.

First, an accelerated process of individualization through the loosening of traditional age and gender definitions of social roles and life transitions is proposed (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991; Kohli 2007). Second, life course policy of the welfare state substitutes the normative regulation of the life course to an increasing extent (Mayer and Schoepflin 1989; Leisering 2003; Weymann 2003). Third, there is an ongoing shift in population growth and the age structure because of declining birth rates and increasing longevity (Kaufmann 2005).

In regard to these fundamental cultural, economic, and political changes in Western welfare states, the crucial issue for life course research has become

how the welfare state, volatile markets, and changing living circumstances facilitate or restrict, demand and promote individuals' shaping of their biographies, and how individual action in turn affects institutions.

In the first decade of the 21st century, discontinuity and disorder are assumed to have become typical features of the female and male life courses; biographical milestones, such as starting a job, parenthood, marriage, or retirement, rarely pass according to conventional age markers. Volatile labor markets create diversified and uncertain social pathways into and within the employment system and thus lead to more age variability of occupational and private transitions. At the same time, individual options in regard to the timing and duration of transitions between life phases and institutions are increasing in addition to the risk of unintended consequences and failures. Everyday life and biographies are no longer conditioned by traditional value-communities, but are rather profoundly influenced by shifting opportunity structures and individual interests. Thus, there is mounting subjective uncertainty concerning the timing, duration and consequences of decisions concerning education, work, and partnership and a declining commitment to the age norms that used to define childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age. Thus arise a blurring of life phases and contingent trajectories. Despite an extremely unequal distribution of life chances and wealth, the market economy and the welfare state provide opportunity as well assistance to people for shaping their biographies. At the same time, the high risk of failures is in modern times a responsibility of the individual.

New standards of individual trajectories across major life domains are arising (see sections II and III). There are even signs of new institutionalization and re-standardization of transitions. For example, in many European societies, cohabitation has become a standard step into a common household. Family formation out of wedlock also is becoming a standard in some countries such as Sweden and (East) Germany. The age markers of transitions to adulthood have shifted, but without having become destandardized. Thus, the age structure of events like marriage and family formation have changed and re-stabilized; the same holds for transitions into the labor market.

Life course policy has become a means to provide institutional support for the conduct of individualized lives. It distributes public goods and constructs institutional arrangements and entitlements to education, training, family support, health care, social assistance, and old age provisions. Thereby, life course policy compensates for the volatility of markets and supports the shaping of transitions, sequences, and whole trajectories over the course of life. The life course policy of the contemporary nation-state is guided by the market and constitutional liberalism of civil society on the one hand and its welfare regime on the other. In liberal, non-communitarian society, civil and political rights and obligations constitute the primary and essential foundation of life course policy.

Through the supplementary establishment of the welfare state, individuals and social groups become connected with a legal, fiscal, and institutional framework that may support individuals' efforts to conduct and plan their lives. It was and still is the modern nation-state which lays the foundation for biographical decision-making and life course policy, with the consequence of national path dependence.

As comparative research documents, the implications of social changes in the wake of economic globalization for the life course vary according to the institutional arrangements that characterize the education system, labor market regulation, health system, and social policy provisions of the state (Swaan 1988; Esping-Anderson 1990; Blossfeld et al. 2005; Blossfeld et al. 2006; Mayer 2005). The question is what will happen to this nation-state based Western life course regime in times of globalization? The strong impact of economic globalization, to pick up just one single aspect of globalization, can be best observed when analyzing transforming societies. Christopher S. Swader's introduction (Chapter 10) to the third section of this volume looks at transforming structures of inequality and the constitution of new institutions, culture, and mentalities simultaneous to the growing relevance of the market economy within individuals' lives.

Economic change, as stimulated by globalization, affects life course patterns in the advanced economies as well as those in developing and transforming societies. The economic regime of mass, assembly-line production in capitalist market societies corresponded to a standardized and regulated life course structure, one offering fairly predictable prospects for major life transitions. In contrast, instability and unpredictability reign within contemporary transitions in advanced economies, as employment loses its permanence, working hours expand, leisure time contracts, and single-earner families become scarce. This recent breakdown in life course patterns in advanced economies parallels similar shifts away from more traditionally governed life course patterns in the post-socialist and developing worlds, which are undergoing rapid economic transformations. It is unlikely, however, that a globalized life course regime is in the making so long as societies operate according to different cultures, institutions, and welfare regimes. The nation-states and their supra-national obligations serve as the central actors for influencing the shift in life course patterns towards a global standard sequence, as exemplified through the standardization of higher education degrees in Europe ("Bologna Process") (Martens and Weymann 2007; Weymann et al. 2007).

Since social change also affects the organization and continuity of 'linked lives,' the family and intergenerational relationships have to adapt to the shifting opportunity structure of living arrangements in the context of globalized markets and changing welfare policy (see Section IV). The cultural heritage of the

bourgeois family model, with its strong impact on gendered patterns of the life course, has lost its normative power over the biographies of many women and men. The biographical costs of sharing one's life with a partner and living in a marriage are increasing. Being committed to a stable intimate relationship becomes an obstacle to individual flexibility, self-realization, and mobility within other life course domains, above all within work life. The relationship between the sphere of work and family is undergoing a fundamental change. In modern Western countries, we observe declining birth rates, changes in the duration and sequences of consensual unions and marriage and increasing rates of separation and divorce. Consequently, life course research is also dedicated to determining which factors are involved in whether, when, and how individuals or couples decide on their living arrangements, on family transitions, and on how to negotiate engagement in different spheres of the life course. The intergenerational dimension of interpersonal relations is another important aspect of the social context relevant for the shaping of biographies, since it draws attention to the interdependence of parents' and children's life courses. Thus, life course research can illuminate how various arrangements of linked lives come about, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the factors that influence population aging and the conditions for solidarity between generations.

Individual Actors and the Life Course

The model of individual choice within institutional resources and constraints is a cornerstone of life course studies. This model involves the integration of purposive action with comparative institutional analysis. The extent to which personality factors and individual skills are becoming more important for decision making and for compensating for the decline of stable life course patterns is also a matter of theorizing and empirical research (Sennett 1998; Dannefer 1999; Pongratz and Voß 2004). The outcomes of less institutionalized transitions between education and work, employment and joblessness, and employment and retirement depend on the pool of material and social resources and individuals' abilities to act rationally by matching short-term decisions with a long-term planning capacity.

In modern society, which champions the cultural script of individualism, there is a tendency to reduce life course explanations to merely a cult of personality entailing individual motives and skills, as documented by the popularity of self-help manuals, counseling, and coaching programs. The life course perspective, however, emphasizes both changing social circumstances and personality development over the lifespan and thus shifts the perspective to the

interrelationship between individual characteristics and social structures and processes across time.

In order to connect micro-social with macro-social level analysis, there is much potential and need for a common theoretical framework for the integration of life course sociology with developmental and life span psychology. Theory and research in a framework of "structure without agency" has by now seen its day because this approach neglected the individual's contribution to the shaping of his/her biography. Instead notions of "agency within structures" and "bounded agency" have become crucial for a better understanding how subjects develop meaningful and coherent biographies in response to objectively contingent life courses (see Section V). Nevertheless, a sophisticated agenda must start with mapping the structural and institutional dimensions as the social contexts of biographical decisions and outcomes. This is most obvious in regard to education and training, employment, family, and social security life domains that individuals have to traverse by actively negotiating contributions, investments, returns, and benefits.

The analysis of the micro-dynamics of individual life courses (biographies) can be greatly improved when psycho-social and life-span concepts are combined, for example by relating theories of socialization, decision making and action in order to explain how people accumulate and implement their capacities and competences as active agents of their biographies (see, as an early example, Strauss 1959; Elder 1998). As sociologists Diewald and Mayer (2008) argue, sociological and psychological approaches derive mutual benefits from developing a joint framework. There are advances in combining sociological concepts and assumptions about the life course with models of human development that take into account that individuals generate and modify their capacities, motives, and goals in mediation with social opportunities and constraints over their entire lifetimes. In addition, a convincing model of the individual as a social actor must include valid assumptions about the internal dynamics of self-regulation, decision-making, and identity construction. Such a model, however, must be embedded in social contexts, the wider social settings which enable and restrict goal setting and achievement and vary in the extent to which they promote individual agency. It is not just the family and close social relationships that structure the interaction of the individual with his/her social world, but the state and primarily its education, labor market, and retirement policies (life course policies: Section II) exert an enormous effect on the life course, especially in periods of profound social change (Silbereisen and Pinquart 2008; Diewald 2006).