Aging and the Life Course An Introduction to Social Gerontology 7th edition Quadagno Solutions Manual

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Chapter 2
Life Course Transitions

Brief IM Outline

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Chapter Outline

I. Life Course Framework

The **life course framework** is an approach to the study of aging that emphasizes the interaction of historical events, individual decisions and opportunities, and effect of early life experiences in determining later life outcomes (G. H. Elder, 2006). As people age, they move through different social roles that provide them with different identities—student, husband or wife, worker, parent. Sociologists call these role changes **transitions.** The concept of transitions refers to the role changes individuals make as they leave school, take a job, get married, have children, or retire. People also experience **countertransitions,** which are produced by others' role changes. Finally, a series of transitions is called a **trajectory**.

The intellectual origins of the sociological approach to the life course lie in several traditions that cross disciplinary boundaries. Three aspects of age stratification theory are relevant to the study of the life course. First, age is one of the bases for regulating social interaction and for ascribing status; second, the timing of the entry into and exit from social positions has age-related consequences; and third, the pattern of biological aging and the sequence of age-related roles are altered by historical events (e.g., improvements in health care, new technologies) (Riley and Riley, 2000). Another influence on the life course approach is the anthropological study of age grading. **Age grades** are ways of using age as a social category to group people by status.

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II. Methodological Issues in Research On the Life Course

A. Age, Period, and Cohort Effects

A central methodological issue in life course research is how to distinguish between age effects, period effects, and cohort effects. An **age effect** is a change that occurs as a result of advancing age. A **period effect** is the impact of a historical event on the entire society. A **cohort effect** is the social change that occurs as one cohort replaces another. Although the concepts of age, period, and cohort effects sound simple, they can be quite difficult to measure. Social gerontologists frequently use *cross-sectional research* to distinguish age, period, and cohort effects, but *longitudinal research* is a better approach.

B. Cross-Sectional Research

Research comparing people of different age cohorts at a single point in time is called **cross-sectional research.** Researchers conducting a cross-sectional study ask the same information of people in several age groups. Differences between age groups that appear to be age effects also may result from period effects. History creates a period effect when change is relatively uniform across successive birth cohorts (G. Elder, 1994).

C. Longitudinal Research

Some of the complex methodological issues involved in distinguishing between age effects, cohort effects, and period effects can be sorted out through **longitudinal research**. In contrast to cross-sectional studies that compare subjects from different cohorts, longitudinal studies follow the same group of people over time.

D. Qualitative Research

Many interesting studies of aging are based on qualitative research. One type of qualitative research is **participant observation**. In these studies researchers observe people in a natural setting, keep copious notes on what they observe, and then organize their observations to help understand patterns of behavior, decision-making processes, and the social character of communities. Another type of qualitative research consists of **open-ended interviews**.

III. Identifying Life Course Events

A. The Timing of Life Course Events

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Timing refers to the idea that there are appropriate ages for making various life course transitions. Age norms define everything people mean when they say, "Act your age." They act as prods or brakes on behavior, sometimes hastening an event, at other times delaying it. In combination, age norms form a prescriptive timetable, called a **social clock,** that orders major life events. The social clock not only influences when people marry, have children, and retire, it also may affect how they feel about entering a new life phase.

Because the expected timing of important life events is looser and more flexible than it may have been in the past, Settersten and Hagestad preferred the term **age timetables** rather than age norms. Perceived timetables of the life course shape people's experiences of growing older by providing reference points and sets of expectations about what they should be doing with their lives.

B. The Duration of Life Course Events

Duration refers to the number of years spent in each phase of the life course (Silverstein and Giarusso, 2011). One distinctive change in the duration of a life course phase is the extension of adolescence. Historically, adolescence ended when young people left the family home. In the past two decades, young people have remained longer in the parental home or left and then returned, creating a **crowded nest.** Instead of children setting out to make their way in the world, the parental home now serves as a base of operations during the phase that precedes marriage and even after marriage for some couples.

C. The Sequencing of Life Course Events

The idea of sequencing presumes that transitions should be made in a particular order (Rindfuss et al., 1987). The implication is of orderliness and irreversibility. Disorder in the sequencing of life events may have negative consequences for later life transitions. The overlapping of life events may also create role conflicts.

D. The Effect of Early Experiences on Adult Outcomes

Inherent in the life course approach is the notion that early experiences reverberate across the whole life course (Ferraro et al., 2009). The quality of family relationships in childhood also has an effect on mental health in adulthood. Adults with divorced parents compared with adults of parents who remained married report greater unhappiness, less satisfaction with life, and more symptoms of anxiety and depression. Early life patterns have an effect on health in later life as well. Finally, some research suggests that childhood traumas influence subsequent

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life course patterns.

E. Demographic Change and Middle Age

The life course "begins and ends with demographic events—birth and death," and demographic change creates variations in the experiences of different cohorts (Uhlenberg, 1996c:226). One effect of demographic change has been the creation of a new phase of the life course—middle age. By the 1970s, the average couple had their first child by their mid-20s and had a total of two children spaced two years apart. By the time husband and wife reached their mid-40s, their children had left home. This left a period of 20 years or more with a couple alone together, not yet old, in an **empty nest.** Thus, changing patterns of childbearing, along with increasing life expectancy, created middle age as a separate phase of the life course. Increasingly, however, the empty nest years are becoming crowded with adult children returning home. Later age of marriage, student debt, and the higher cost of living are all responsible for this trend.

IV. The Theory of Cumulative Disadvantage

Over the life course, there is increasing diversity between members of a cohort, which creates greater inequality (Ferraro et al., 2009). In other words, the advantage of one individual or group over another grows over time, so that small differences between them are magnified (DiPrete and Eirich, 2006). People who start life at an advantage are likely to experience increasing benefits as they age. As a result of this process, inequality among people 65 or older is the highest of all age groups (O'Rand, 2006). A central concern of life course research is to explain why inequality increases with age. The **theory of cumulative disadvantage** highlights the influences of earlier life experiences on the quality of life in old age. Those who are advantaged early in life have more opportunity to obtain an education, get a good job, earn a high salary, and save for retirement.

V. How Government Influences the Life Course

The government has had the greatest impact on two phases of the life course: adolescence and old age (Kohli, 2009). One question now being raised concerns whether the division of the life course into three stages is still functional. Not only are people living longer, they are also healthier than in the past. Most older people have no serious disabilities, and many remain active well into their 80s (Manton and Land, 2000). Today, there are serious proposals to reduce age differentiation and spread education, work, and leisure over the entire life course. Given the recognition that stages are constantly being transformed, a more useful approach may be to emphasize the transitions that link life phases to diverse trajectories.

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Class Discussion Topics

1. Age Norms and Life Course Sequencing
   How are age norms changing? Do they have negative or positive effects on life course transitions?

2. Distinguishing between Effects
   What are examples of age, period, and cohort effects?

3. Cumulative Disadvantage
   What are some examples of cumulative disadvantage, and how can individuals overcome them?

Student Project and Research Suggestions

1. In-Depth Interview
   Find an older family member or friend, and get their life story. In the analysis, try to find themes of cumulative advantages and disadvantages.

2. Surveying Age Norms
   Have students select five old people and five young people, and ask them to survey these people on their attitudes about life course transitions and sequencing. Ask them to observe if all people are loosening their age norms or if this is an age effect.

Answer Guidelines for "Thinking about Aging" Questions

1. What are the practical implications of the life course approach to social gerontology?

   Answer: Have students emphasize the ability to do cross-sectional research and longitudinal research. Have them emphasize the detailed results it will gather about people of different generations and cohorts from different groups in the society.

2. Analyze the timing, duration, and sequencing of your parents' life course. Was it typical for their generation?

   Answer: This answer will be based on students' personal experiences; however, this question might be good to discuss age norms and sequencing in the society.

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3. What was the major historical event of your life course? How did it affect your life?

   Answer: Bring up the times during wars and recent economic crisis to give students examples of major historical events that may affect their lives.

4. If government officials want to promote social equality, at what stage of the life course should they intervene? Explain.

   Answer: Discuss how government officials can have strong positive effects on altering the adolescence stage in the life course.

5. If you were a government policymaker, would you use your authority to alter the course of adolescence? If so, how?

   Answer: Discuss examples such as the No Child Left Behind Act to stimulate discussion on how government policymakers can alter the course of adolescence among students.

Lecture/Class Activity Ideas

1. Compare the research studies discussed in the chapter, and break them down by their type of research (i.e., cross-sectional and longitudinal) and what they are researching (i.e., age, period, or cohort effects).

2. Provide examples of different age, period, and cohort effects to help students better understand the differences between the three effects.

3. Talk about the government programs that are used to promote social equality in a system where cumulative disadvantage affects so many people. Use this as a lead for future class discussions on the role of government in aging policy.

Community, State, and National Resources

Community Resources

1. American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)–Local Chapter
   This organization has a diverse membership group. Invite members to class to discuss the policy issues that the group is currently examining.

2. Area Agency on Aging

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Each county government has one of these agencies. Students may be introduced to it and the services offered by it.

3. Office on Aging
   Most communities have an office or a major center that addresses issues on aging for older adults. A member of this office can be invited to class to discuss issues/concerns of older adults in the community.

4. Volunteer Clearinghouses
   Focus on this resource as an opportunity to find volunteer activities for students in the community.

State Resources

1. State Network of Area Agencies on Aging
   This network is a compilation of all the area agencies on aging in the state.

2. State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Office
   This office can be contacted early in the semester for subsequent discussions related to elderly abuse or long-term care.

3. State Gerontological Society or Association
   Inform students of the state gerontological society or agency in the state. Encourage students to join and participate in its annual meeting.

4. Gerontological Programs or Institutes at Other Public and Private Universities in the State
   Inform students of other colleges and universities in the state with gerontological programs or institutes.

National Resources

1. The Gerontological Society of America
   This is the national professional organization for students who are interested in the aging process. Students should be encouraged to join if they plan to continue with their graduate school or pursue a career in gerontology. The website address is as follows: http://www.geron.org/. Some special units of this society include the National Academy on an Aging Society and the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education.

2. American Society on Aging

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This organization's goal is to promote the knowledge and skills of those working with older adults and their families. They also provide training programs and workshops. The Web address of the organization is as follows: http://www.asaging.org.

Internet Resources and Activities

1. Administration on Aging: Profile of Older Americans
   This resource shows the latest key statistics on older Americans in key subject areas including, poverty, housing, health and health care, race, and marital status. This resource is available online at https://aoa.acl.gov/Aging_Statistics/Profile/index.aspx.

2. Age-Friendly Philadelphia (2012, (PDF) Philadelphia Corporation for Aging by Kate Clark and Allen Glicksman)
   This resource is available online at https://fedweb-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/fed-2/2/Clark%2520and%2520Glicksman%2520-%2520%2520Age-friendly%2520Phila-%2520JHE.pdf.

3. "Hispanics Living Longer than Whites, Blacks. But Why?" (October 14, 2010, article from the National Public Radio)
   This resource is available online at http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2010/10/14/130567637/hispanics-living-longer-than-whites-blacks.

Suggested Reading

Bengston, Vern, Glen Elder, and Noella Putney. 2012. "The Life Course Perspective on Aging: Linked Lives, Timing and History." pp. 9–17 in *Adult Lives: A Life Course Perspective*, edited by Jeanne Katz, Sheila Peace, and Sue Spurr. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kohli, Martin. 2009. "The World We Forgot: A Historical Review of the Life Course." pp. 64–90 In *The life Course Reader: Individuals and Societies Across Time*, edited by Walter R. Heinz, Johannes Huinink, and Ansgar Weymann, Frankfurt: Campus-Verlag.

Silverstein, Merril and Roseann Giarusso. 2011. Aging Individuals, Families, and Societies: Micro-Meso-Macro Linkages in the Life Course. Pp. 35–49 In *Handbook of Sociology of Aging*. edited by R.A. Settersten and J.L. Angel. New York, NY: Springer.

Toothman, Erica L. and Anne E. Barrett. 2011. "Mapping Midlife: An Examination of Social

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Factors Shaping Conceptions of the Timing of Middle Age." *Advances in Life Course Research,* 16(3), 99–111.

Wakabayashi, Chizuko and Katharine M. Donato. 2006. "Does Caregiving Increase Poverty among Women in Later Life? Evidence from the Health and Retirement Survey." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 47(3):258–274.

Films and Videos

Sara Lerner: Growing Up during the Great Depression (2010, 8 minutes)
This video shows pictures of different families at a relocation camp in California during the Great Depression. The video is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=xX7JlTpMf1E.

Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick? (2008, California Newsreel, 240 minutes)
This is a seven-part video series bundled into four television hours. Many of the episodes discuss the cumulative disadvantange because of race and wealth. The video clips are available online at www.unnaturalcauses.org.

Up (2009, Pixar Animation Studios, 96 minutes)
This movie shows the sequencing of life course events for a couple. Several parts of the movie are available on YouTube.

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Life Course Transitions

Chapter 2

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Chapter Outline

- The life course framework
- Methodological issues in research on the life course
- Identifying life course events
- The theory of cumulative disadvantage
- How government influences the life course

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Life Course Framework

- Emphasizes the interaction of historical events and individual decisions and opportunities that affect later life outcomes
- When is the best age to have a child?
  - By what age should people finish school?
  - When should a couple purchase a house?

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Role Transitions

- As people age, they move through different social roles that provide them with different identities—student, husband or wife, worker, parent
- The concept of transitions refers to the role changes individuals make as they leave school, take a job, get married, have children, or retire

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Role Transitions (continued)

- **Countertransitions** are produced by others' role changes
- A **trajectory** is a series of transitions

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Age, Period, and Cohort Effects

- **Age effect** refers to a change that occurs as a result of advancing age
  - Example - Declining health
- **Period effect** refers to the impact of a historical event on the entire society
  - Example - How did 9/11 affect the lives of all Americans?
- **Cohort effect** refers to the social change that occurs as one cohort replaces another

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Cross-Sectional Research on Aging

- In cross sectional studies, the same information is collected from people of several age groups
- Advantages
  - Less costly than longitudinal studies
  - Help draw conclusions about cohort effects that cannot be gained through the study of a single age group

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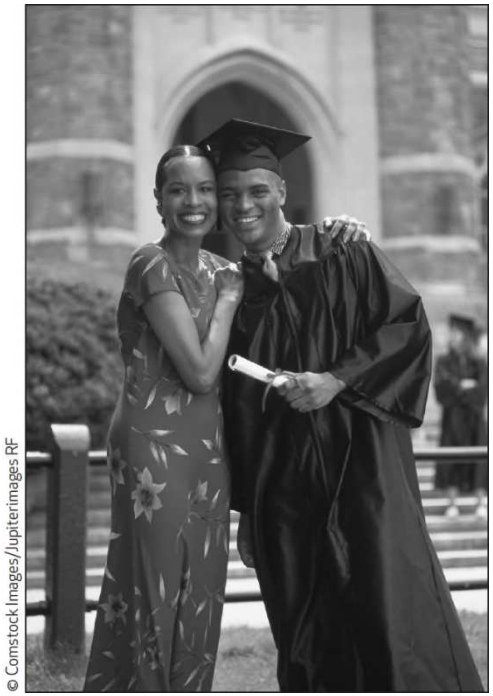
Cross-Sectional Research on Aging (continued)

- Disadvantage
  - Does not help in distinguishing age, period, and cohort effects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Longitudinal Research on Aging

- Longitudinal studies follow the same group of people over time
- Advantages
  - Better than cross-sectional studies for distinguishing age effects from cohort effects
  - Make it possible to make inferences about age change within each cohort and the effect of living through a period across cohorts

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Longitudinal Research on Aging (continued)

- Disadvantages
  - Can be costly because people are reinterviewed several times
  - Can have biases as people drop out of the study

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Qualitative Research

- **Participant observation** studies
  - Researchers observe people in a natural setting and keep copious notes on what they observe
  - Organize their observations to help understand patterns of behavior and decision-making processes
- **Open-ended interviews**
  - Allow people to describe their experiences and opinions in their own words

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Age Norms

- Research conducted by Neugarten
- Timing refers to the idea that there are appropriate ages for making various life course transitions
- Age norms form a "social clock" that orders major life events like marriage, having children, and retiring
- Age norms are continually being transformed

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Table 2.1 - Age Timetables for Major Life Events

	Average Age Deadlines	
	Male	*Female*
Family events		
Leaving home	21.7	21.9
Returning home	27.2	28.2
Marriage	27.9	25.9
Parenthood	29.9	28.8
Completing childbearing	44.2	39.1
Grandparenthood	52.3	50.9
Work and educational events		
Exit full-time schooling	26.4	25.5
Enter full-time work	22.8	21.7
Settle on career/job	29.0	28.9
Peak of work career	41.7	39.8
Retirement	61.3	59.3

Source: Settersten and Hagestad (1996a, 1996b).

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Age Timetables

- More recent research on age norms by Settersten and Hagestad
  - A high proportion of respondents could identify an age deadline for most events
  - Most people believed that there were no consequences for missing cultural age deadlines

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The Duration of Life Course Events

- Duration refers to the number of years spent in each phase of the life course
  - The duration of life events is continually being transformed

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The Duration of Life Course Events (continued)

- One distinctive change is the extension of adolescence
  - Until about 1980, grown children were expected to become independent and not return home as permanent residents
  - In the past two decades, young people have remained longer in the parental home or left and then returned home
- Another is the extension of old age due to increase in life expectancy

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The Sequencing of Life Course Events

- The idea of sequencing presumes that transitions should be made in a particular order
  - Marriage should precede childbirth

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The Sequencing of Life Course Events (continued)

- Disorder in the sequencing of life events may have negative consequences for later life transitions
  - Interrupted schooling and early parenthood are both associated with lower income later in life
  - The overlapping of life events may also create role conflicts

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The Effect of Early Life Experiences on Mental and Physical Health

- The quality of family relationships in childhood has an effect on mental health in adulthood
  - Adults with divorced parents compared with adults of parents who remained married report greater unhappiness, less satisfaction with life, and more symptoms of anxiety and depression

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The Effect of Early Life Experiences on Mental and Physical Health (continued 1)

- Parental conflict and divorce erodes ties between parents and children in later life and leads to greater conflict among siblings as adults
- Children who are overweight are much more likely than slim children to be obese as adults

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The Effect of Early Life Experiences on Mental and Physical Health (continued 2)

- Being overweight at age 15 and 16 is a strong predictor of adult obesity
- Genetic factors may be responsible, but it is also possible that obesity is a learned behavior caused by parental eating habits

- Women who had been sexually abused as children found that they were more sexually active in adolescence and adulthood than other women

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Demographic Change and Middle Age

- Until recently, middle age was indistinct from the rest of adult life
  - In the nineteenth century, women had their first children when they were in their twenties and continued having children until they were nearly 40
  - Because women bore many children, the years from 40 to 60 were consumed by child-rearing tasks

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Demographic Change and Middle Age (continued)

- By the 1970s, the average couple had their first child by their mid-20s and had a total of two children spaced two years apart
  - Only 40 percent of married life was spent in child rearing
  - By the time husband and wife reached their mid-40s, their children had left home

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Life Can Be Complex in Middle Age

- Middle age is a period of 20 years or more with a couple alone together, not yet old, in an **empty nest**

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The Theory of Cumulative Disadvantage

- Over the life course, there is increasing diversity between members of a cohort, which creates greater inequality
- People who start life at an advantage are likely to experience increasing benefits as they age
  - As a result of this process, inequality among people 65 or older is the highest of all age groups

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