CHAPTER 6.1

The Lifecourse Perspective on Ageing: Linked Lives, Timing, and History

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Only in the last few decades have researchers in ageing recognized the importance of larger social and historical contexts for understanding the health and wellbeing of individuals across the lifespan. Prior to the mid 1960s, the study of human lives was exceedingly rare in sociology and psychology, especially in relation to sociohistorical context (Elder, 1998). Most human development research was characterized by a life cycle approach, one of the oldest accounts of how lives and families are organized over time. The life cycle provided a useful way of thinking about the intergenerational patterning of lives, and their sequence of role transitions, such as marriage and childbearing. The duration of intergenerational cycles, however, varies greatly, depending on the timing of marriage and childbearing. The greater the time spread between the generations, the more diverse the individual's historical experience. In addition the life cycle does not represent contemporary patterns of divorce and remarriage or childbearing outside of marriage. And it does not apply to the never married or non-parents. While the concept of life cycle provided an account of role sequences and linked lives, it did not locate people according to their life stage or historical context.

In the 1960s and '70s, the life cycle approach began to converge with a new awareness of the multiple meanings of age. Age orders social roles and events, but it also orders people through birth year and birth cohorts. Chronological age refers to stage in the developmental ageing process. These new ways of thinking about age included an emphasis on subjective experiences with society's age structures and the individual's own construction of the lifecourse, as expressed particularly in the pioneering work of Bernice Neugarten (Neugarten and Datan, 1973). Age distinctions were required to place families in history and to mark the transitions of adult life. Since the mid 1980s, inquiry into the continuity and change of human lives in relation to interpersonal, structural, and historical forces has grown exponentially (Elder, 2003; Elder and Johnson, 2001). Lifecourse studies have become integral to social scientific research on ageing.

THE LIFECOURSE PERSPECTIVE

The lifecourse as concept and theoretical orientation

The "lifecourse" is conceptualized as a sequence of age-linked transitions that are embedded in social institutions and history. As a theoretical orientation, the lifecourse perspective sensitizes researchers to the fundamental importance of historical conditions and change for understanding individual development and family life. It establishes a common field of inquiry by defining a framework that guides research in terms of problem identification and formulation, variable selection and rationales, and strategies of design and analysis. The institutional structuring of lives is at the core of lifecourse analysis (Mortimer and Shanahan, 2003). Institutional contexts – the family, schools, work and labor markets, church, government – define both the normative pathways of social roles, including key transitions, and the psychological, behavioral, and

health-related trajectories of persons as they move through them.

Age, in its various meanings, serves as the analytic link between changing lives, changing family relations, and changing historical contexts. Families are age-differentiated, especially because generational position defines an individual's place in the extended family structure and shapes identities, roles, and responsibilities. At the same time, families are age-integrated in that individuals of varying ages and cohorts are joined together and family-related roles and activities extend across life even as specific roles and activities shift up the generational ladder over time (Settersten, 2003). Within pluralistic contemporary societies, lifecourse trajectories and transitions display considerable variability. Yet despite this variability, continuity remains a predominant feature of individual psychological and behavioral trajectories. Multigenerational families as well display considerable continuity over time.

Principles of the lifecourse

Five principles define the lifecourse perspective. First is the principle of "linked lives," which emphasizes the interconnectedness of lives, particularly as linked across the generations by bonds of kinship. Lives are embedded in relationships with people and are influenced by them. They are linked over time in relation to changing times, places, and social institutions. Economic declines can have reverberating effects on the multiple and interlocking pathways of family members. For example, a mother's entry into the labor force can alleviate her family's financial troubles and contribute to her children's educational attainment, but it may also change the routines of family life or the balance of power in her marital relationship. Likewise, the plans of grandparents for retirement can be changed when adult children and grandchildren return home and need their support.

The second lifecourse principle pertains to historical time and place, emphasizing the importance of social and historical context in shaping individual lives. Large events such as depressions and wars, or the relative tranquility or turbulence of a historical period, shape individual psychology, family interactions, and world views. Such historical events and conditions create the opportunities and constraints that circumscribe choices and behaviors and can change the direction of lives. Follow-up studies of children who grew up during the Depression show that sociohistorical events (such as the Second World War and the US government's G. I. Bill) sometimes mitigated the negative effects of economic deprivation in childhood, opening up educational and career opportunities in young adulthood (Elder, 1987). Social change can also reduce options, as occurred in the economic restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s.

The third principle emphasizes the importance of transitions and their timing relative to the social contexts in which individuals make choices (Bengtson and Allen, 1993; Elder, 1995); the developmental antecedents and consequences of life transitions, events, and behavior patterns vary according to their timing in a person's life. There can be a "best fit" in the timing of individual development and family life stage, and their temporal convergence with structural and historically created opportunities (Elder *et al.*, 2003). For example, all age cohorts were confronted by the social upheavals of the late 1960s and 1970s, but at different stages in their lifecourse which presented different options and adaptive pressures. Biographical and historical timing had consequences for their demographic behavior, occupational outcomes, and psychological wellbeing (Putney and Bengtson, 2003). The pace of biographical, institutional, and historical change are characteristically asynchronous, producing structural or cultural lags. These disjunctures create tensions in individual lives, but they can also provide the impetus for change.

The fourth principle concerns agency and the idea that planfulness and effort can affect life outcomes. Lifecourse theory recognizes that individuals are active agents in the construction of their lives. They make choices within the opportunities and constraints provided by family background, stage in the lifecourse, structural arrangements, and historical conditions. Family life also has agentic aspects, as reflected in negotiation processes. For example, in a qualitative study, Pyke and Bengtson (1996) examined the differences between "individualistic" and "collectivistic" families when choices are made regarding caregiving for dependent elders.

The fifth principle centers on the idea that ageing and human development are life-long processes, and that the relationships, events, and behaviors of earlier life stages have consequences for later life relationships, statuses, and wellbeing. For example,

longitudinal research has shown that the nurturing affirmation of children by parents contributes to higher self-esteem in adulthood (Roberts and Bengtson, 1996). Personal change and continuity are represented by concepts of lifespan development, such as cumulative advantage and disadvantage and self-identity.

Generations, cohorts, and social change

One advantage of multigenerational research on processes of ageing is that it represents related individuals rather than separate and unrelated birth cohorts (Alwin and McCammon, 2003). This enables the assessment of similarities and differences within families while controlling for various family-related factors. However, the effort to incorporate history into the study of lives and family relations has been difficult. The concept of "generation," most commonly used as a kinship term denoting position in the biological line of descent, does not easily index historical location or processes. This is because differences in childbearing patterns and the temporal gap between generations vary between families. In this sense, generations and age groups are not equivalent.

To understand the diverse pathways of individuals and families over the last half-century requires that they be situated in historical context. Analytically, this can be accomplished through the concept of "age cohort." Cohort implies the intersection of historical influence as indexed by birth year, and individual development or maturation. Birth cohorts share a social and cultural history, experiencing events and cultural moods when they are at the same stage of life. Characteristics of a birth cohort and events that the cohort experiences combine to affect members in distinctive ways, influencing their attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes across the entire lifecourse. Economic and political conditions leave lasting marks on those born in different historical periods. For women, the interaction of biology and biography with prevailing gender role norms and structural constraints has profoundly shaped their lives, but it has done so in historically specific ways, depending on their cohort membership. There is much variability within cohorts as well; members can be distinguished by class, gender, race, or their age when confronted by different socioeconomic events and conditions.

Cohort effects refer to the impact of historical events and structural arrangements on members of a given cohort as they grow older. However, such effects are not one-way; ageing cohorts in turn affect social structures (Riley *et al.*, 1994). The responses of one cohort to historical experiences often become normative patterns, affecting later born cohorts (Alwin and McCammon, 2003).

Age cohorts operate as forces of social change. "Generational turnover," or cohort succession, is often cited as a significant source of population change in attitudes and behaviors, as new cohorts bring their unique orientations into the population (Ryder, 1965). The cohort perspective suggests that historical conditions leave an indelible imprint on the attitudes of young adults at a time when they are most susceptible to absorbing the social values of the period, a phenomenon known as the "impressionable youth" hypothesis (Alwin *et al.*, 1991; Alwin and Krosnick, 1991; Clausen, 1993; Elder, 1994). Crucial to this argument is the way personal biography aligns with historical contingencies to produce sharp and durable variations across cohorts.

Paradoxically, societies can change both because individuals change (intracohort or aging effects) and because they remain stable or unchanged after an early period of socialization. Change occurs through cohort succession, where earlier born cohorts with certain values and characteristics are replaced by younger cohorts with different values and characteristics (Alwin and McCammon, 2003). This set of mechanisms is referred to as the Age-Period-Cohort model of social change because these mechanisms encapsulate the influence of ageing, time period and cohort membership on social change. The impact of a historical event on a cohort may be decomposed into a main effect (that which affects other cohorts similarly), and a unique effect (that which affects the cohort particularly). In addition, the strength or direction of change due to ageing may be conditioned on the unique historical location of each cohort.

De-institutionalization of the lifecourse

The structure of the lifecourse is closely linked to work life transitions. Across the first half of the twentieth century, these transitions became increasingly segmented into three distinct periods, reflecting an age-differentiated lifecourse (Riley *et al.*,

1994): preparation for work when young (education); work, during the middle years; and retirement from work in late midlife (Kohli, 1986). In the last few decades, however, there are signs that age structuring in education and work may be loosening – a de-institutionalization, or destandardization, of the lifecourse (Heinz, 2003). These changes in the "expected" lifecourse have implications for the study of lives and multigenerational families. Lifecourse patterns once thought fairly stable have become more fluid. They have shifted across different spheres – education, work, retirement, family – for successive cohorts of men and women, for subgroups (especially by race and social class), and across cultures.

Individuals can now move between areas and simultaneously pursue education, work, and leisure experiences throughout life, rather than being restricted to one or the other in different stages of life. In the area of work, there are indications that patterned "career" trajectories are giving way to increasing individualization (Heinz, 2003). Heinz argues that in postindustrial society there is an increasing emphasis upon personal decisions and responsibility in the shaping of work life, and a corresponding decline of normative age-markers for the timing and sequencing of labor market participation, and the timing of retirement. Paid work remains the foundation of the lifecourse, but continuous careers and stable employment are less certain because of more turbulent and globalized labor markets. At the beginning of the millennium, workers are increasingly "on their own," assuming greater responsibility for the timing of transitions, the time spent in school and work, the construction of their own pathways through the employment system, and ultimately the adequacy of provisions in retirement.

FOUNDATIONAL STUDIES OF THE LIFECOURSE

Lifecourse theory emerged in part out of efforts to understand the Great Depression experience in families and lives (Elder, 1974, 1999). Initially, an intergenerational framework and traditional life cycle approach seemed appropriate for investigating the process by which economic hardship affected the lives of children by altering family relations and socialization. However, the dramatic change of life experience from the 1920s into the late 1930s required the consideration of "age" as the essential link to historical change and life stage. A combination of the life cycle and age-based models, along with concepts of lifespan development, resulted in a multifaceted theoretical orientation on the lifecourse.

Children of the Great Depression

An early lifecourse study, *Children of the Great Depression* (Elder, 1974) challenged the then prevalent developmental stage theories by demonstrating the profound effects of historical events on human development, not only in youth but throughout the adult lifecourse. Premised on the idea that processes of individual and family change are inextricably linked to processes of historical change, the research strategy was to start with the historical event itself, and then track its myriad effects on family relations and individuals over time.

The socioeconomic change of families (with parents and children) is a strategic point at which to investigate the dynamics of generational change, of change between old and young in the succession of generations. The sample, derived from archival data in the Oakland Growth Study, consisted of 167 children born in 1920–1 who were intensively studied from 1932 to 1939. These children were preadolescents and adolescents during the Depression decade, and graduated from high school just before the Second World War. Three group distinctions entered into the assessment of economic change in family adaptation and life outcomes: birth cohorts; status groups within a particular cohort (those who had suffered economic deprivation and those who had not); and economic sectors of status groups (working-class and middle-class).

The study followed this group of children from their preadolescent years early in the Depression to their middle-age years, tracing step by step the ways in which deprivation left its mark on their relationships, careers, lifestyles, and personalities. Family adaptations and conditions were viewed as primary links between economic hardship and the individual – his or her behavior, personality, and lifecourse. These linkages included: (1) changes in the division of labor (the necessity for new forms of

economic maintenance altered the domestic and economic roles of family members, shifting responsibilities to mother and the other children); (2) changes in family relationships (father's loss of economic status and resulting adaptations in family maintenance increased the relative power of mother, reduced the level and effectiveness of parental control, and lessened the attractiveness of father as a model); (3) social strains in the family (status ambiguity, conflicts, and emotional distress were consequences of diminished resources, loss or impairment of parents, and inconsistency in the status of the family and its members). The enduring effects of the Depression experience among the Oakland adults can be summarized by three points: the paths though which they achieved adult status; adult health and preferences in ways of responding to life's problems; and values.

Intergenerational continuity and change in rural America

The farm crisis of the 1980s, during which rural Iowa lost nearly 5 percent of its population, constituted a historical event that had major implications for family economies and intergenerational relations. How did outmigration from America's farms affect family ties, and especially relations between the generations? In the midst of this crisis, a panel study was launched to investigate the effects of socioeconomic decline in the region on parents and their children (Conger and Elder, 1994; Elder and Conger, 2000). The research strategy followed that used in the study for *Children of the Great Depression*: to trace out the effects of a major historical event on the way individuals, families, and households respond and adapt to major economic, social, or political disruptions and live out their lives. In the sample of 451 households, 30 percent of the families were involved in farming, and 13 percent had given up farming as a result of the farm crisis. The study focused on the interlocking nature of family economies, intergenerational relations, and the lifecourse of ageing. Among G2 parents who had left farming, exits occurred either at the beginning of their work career, or some years later as a result of the farm crisis. Such exits, which represent "generational breaks," can have important implications for proximity to parents, frequency of contact and the quality of relations with parents, and caregiving. An analysis of intergenerational continuity and change (Elder *et al.*, 1995) compared farm to non-farm sons' relations with their G1 parents. Those who remained on the farm lived closer to and had more contact with parents, had more intense emotional relations with parents, and were involved in more caregiving to elderly parents. Surprisingly, loss of the family farm by sons had little impact on intergenerational relations with elderly fathers and mothers, at least in the short term.

LIFECOURSE STUDIES OF INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS

How are we to examine change and continuity in multigenerational families in contemporary times? As we have noted, generational role or position does not offer a precise way of connecting people's lives to the changes in society, because life cycle and age are essentially uncoupled. There is too much variation in the timing of life cycle transitions, if they occur at all, to afford intergenerational comparisons in historical time. However, this restrictive situation may be changing. With longitudinal studies of sufficient time span, age-matching across the generations becomes possible, thereby enabling the linking of age and life stage, generational placement, and intergenerational processes to historical change.

Multigenerational families in changing times

The Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG), begun in 1971 and now with eight waves of data, is a study of linked members from some 350 three- and four-generation families as they have grown up and grown old during a period of dramatic social and economic change. A major aim of the LSOG research program is to investigate the effects of sociohistorical change on the interactions among and ageing of successive family generations. Are intergenerational relationships changing? Have the dramatic social changes of the past four decades weakened family bonds? In what ways do strong intergenerational bonds promote individual family members' wellbeing over time? It is important to examine these issues because recent historical trends – such as population

ageing, occupational restructuring, and diversifying family forms – have altered both the macro- and micro-social contexts in which individuals negotiate the challenges of adult development and ageing. These issues have important implications for healthcare and social policy in a rapidly ageing population: if the functions of the family have declined, then the burden on public services to the elderly will likely increase.

A lifecourse approach to multigenerational family research considers how family relationships change or remain stable across individual lives and family time, and how these processes are linked to multiple and evolving historical contexts. Multiple temporalities and levels of influences need to be taken into account. Recent advancements in multilevel modeling techniques coupled with the maturation of longitudinal studies are providing researchers with new opportunities to assess empirically these precepts of the lifecourse framework.

CHANGES IN PARENTAL INFLUENCE ON THE LIFECOURSE OUTCOMES OF OFFSPRING. A recent study examined how family relationships serve as conduits by which values, resources, and behaviors are transmitted across multiple generations. Bengtson *et al*. (2002) used parent–child dyads and a generation-sequential design to investigate intergenerational influences on sons' and daughters' education and occupational aspiration, self-esteem, and values (individualism and materialism). The study also examined how transmission processes have been affected by parental divorce and maternal employment.

The analytic design was based on two research questions. First, have the aspirations, values, and self-esteem of Generation X youth (G4s, born between 1966 and 1980) been adversely affected by changing opportunity structures and rising divorce and maternal employment rates over recent decades? Second, were "baby-boom" parents (G3s) less *influential* for the development of their Generation X children's aspirations, values, and self-esteem than G2 parents had been for the development of these attributes among baby-boom youth? The study examined three linkages between family influences and young adults' outcomes: the family's socialization functions; the family's access to social resources; and the quality of parent–child emotional bonds and their effect on intergenerational transmission processes.

Findings indicate that the patterns of parental *influences* on youth's outcomes were remarkably similar across two generations (young baby-boomers and Generation X youth) and historical time periods (growing up in the 1960s and the 1990s). This suggests that despite changes in family structure and socioeconomic context, intergenerational influences on youth's educational and occupational aspirations, self-esteem, and value orientations remain strong. When Generation X youth were compared with their baby-boom parents when they were in youth three decades earlier, Generation Xers had higher aspirations and higher self-esteem, and were more collectivistic. Across the generations, parental resources strongly affected their children's educational and occupational aspirations, suggesting the continuing importance of learning and modeling processes within families.

How important were period effects, such as the increases in marital disruption and women's labor force participation since the 1960s? Findings indicate that maternal employment did not negatively affect the aspirations, values, and self-esteem of youth across these two generations. Generation Xers whose parents divorced were slightly less advantaged in terms of educational and occupational aspirations and self-esteem than those who came from non-divorced families, but they were nevertheless higher on these measures than were their baby-boomer parents at the same age, regardless of family structure.

Among Generation Xers, parental divorce affected the influence of mothers' affirmation on their children's self-esteem. It was not that children of divorce felt less close to their mothers than children from two-parent families. Rather, in the context of divorce, closeness to mothers turned out to be a weaker determinant of the self-esteem that children ultimately developed. Consistent with other research (Amato, 1994; Amato and Sobolewski, 2001; Silverstein and Bengtson, 1997), father–child affective bonds were found to be significantly weaker for Generation Xers than they were for baby boomers in their youth, a result that can be largely attributed to the increase in parental divorce. Divorced fathers were found to have significantly weaker emotional bonds with their children than

mothers, whether divorced or not. Further, parental divorce greatly reduced the ability of baby-boom fathers to *influence* their Generation X children's aspirations and self-esteem.

VALUE ORIENTATIONS OVER THE LIFECOURSE. In a second lifecourse study using data from the LSOG, Roberts and Bengtson (1999) examined individual and social-structural factors that account for lifetime stability and change in two value orientations: individualism and materialism. They also examined how these values of individuals relate to broader sociohistorical and cultural shifts in value orientations. Are value orientations fixed dimensions of one's personality once adulthood is reached, or are they susceptible to adult socialization processes and changing cultural and social environments?

A generational-sequential design and hierarchical linear modeling techniques were used to address the temporal and structural complexities posed by these questions. With traditional linear modeling approaches it has been difficult to model accurately effects across structural levels – individual, family, and sociohistorical – in single-level predictor models. Statistical analysis of hierarchically structured data is sensitive to the nested nature of multilevel observations. In this analysis, individual and group growth curves in value orientations were estimated. Structural effects were assessed by estimating the higher order effects of generation, gender, and family on these growth curves.

Results showed both intra- and inter-cohort effects. G3 baby boomers became slightly more collectivist over time although there was also a pattern of significant differences between the older (G1 and G2) and younger (G3) generations. The endorsement of individualism declined across the generations from G1s to G3s. And while individuals tended to become more collectivistic as they aged, the sample as a whole was becoming more individualistic over time due to cohort replacement. There was a secular trend towards greater materialism, similar to the shift towards greater individualism during the period. However, this shift to greater materialism was not accounted for by developmental change. This suggests that most of the change in materialism reflects a sociohistorical trend. Interestingly, G1s exhibited the largest shift towards greater materialism, perhaps reflecting financial security concerns as this group grew older.

Findings illuminated bidirectional flows of influence linking individuals and their sociohistorical contexts. However, only limited information was gleaned about family-level change in response to social change, or about the effects of other meso-level contexts such as the workplace on individual outcomes or on overall societal changes. Future research will investigate how these meso-level contexts serve as "conduits" for bidirectional influences. This requires data-gathering strategies that allow assessments of stability and change across multiple dimensions of the meso- and macro-level contexts.

Methodological advances in lifecourse studies of families and ageing

Current LSOG research addresses several substantive questions. Do adult children today provide less support to their aged parents than *their* parents provided to aged parents three and a half decades earlier? Are norms of familism weakening over multiple dimensions of time as represented by ageing, historical period, and birth cohort? How are trajectories of ageing shaped by relationships between generations over time and are families able to buffer the effects of chronic and acute stressors on individuals' wellbeing? Have sociohistorical changes undermined the ability of older-generation family members to transmit their values, attitudes, and behaviors to younger-generation family members?

Maturation of the LSOG provides the opportunity not only to investigate these questions but also to develop statistical models that are capable of distinguishing the unique influences of ageing, period, cohort, and family membership on intergenerational processes. In order to assess the impact of social change on families, it is necessary to have data on the ageing of successive generations over identical age ranges. With 35 years of data, new designs can take full advantage of the cross-historical age-span match between successive generations.

A *generation-sequential design* permits adjacent generations in the same family (i.e., matched parent–child dyads) to be compared as they age over the same stage of life but during different historical time spans. This approach contextualizes ageing by

allowing the examination of family development across two historical periods. Because ageing effects are held constant across generations, it is possible to isolate period/cohort effects on family development and responses, and to assess the effects of social change on the developmental trajectories of successive generations.

An *age-matched cross-generation design* reflects a cross-sectional comparison of parents to their children when those children reach the *same age* as their parents, and do so in another historical context. Key to this analytic design is that children "age-into" the same age as their parents over time. Without equating linked generations on chronological age it is impossible to assess adequately the effects of sociohistorical change on family processes across generations. The age-matched cross-generation design also allows us to address historical change in *intrafamilial* processes and to assess the strength of continuity across successive generational pairs separated by up to three and one-half decades of time.

CONCLUSION

How does one make sense of the complex connections that link the course of an individual's life within the context of broader social influences, such as family and society? What are the effects of social change on the experiences and direction of human lives, and on the processes of ageing itself? Such questions have long puzzled developmental theorists who have sought to understand the complex interplay of environmental and biological forces in human development (Baltes, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989). It was not until the 1960s that family and ageing researchers interested in the study of lives began to pay heed to Mills' (1959) central insight that history shapes, and is shaped by, biography. A convergence of influences required new ways of looking at how people lived their lives – understandings that far exceeded the reach of traditional life cycle approaches. Several important trends of the twentieth century account for this dramatic change in research focus and energy: the maturation of early child development samples; the rapidity of social change; the changing age structure of society, particularly the ageing of the populations; and the dramatic growth of longitudinal research over the last few decades.

Since the 1960s, the lifecourse approach itself has been shaped by studies of the social world, its constraints, options, and social change. As a theoretical orientation, the lifecourse perspective orients research as to how lives are socially organized in biological, social, and historical time and guides explanations of how the resulting social pattern affects the way individuals think, feel, and act, as they age over time. Their proper study challenges us to take all life stages into account through linked lives across generations, from infancy to the grandparents of old age. This approach is particularly relevant today, where the rapid growth of the oldest segments of society lends greater significance to problems of the aged. Lifecourse studies are helping to locate people in a matrix of age-graded, family relationships and to place families in the social structures, cultures, and populations of time and place. These studies have brought time and temporality to an understanding of individual lives, families, and ageing.

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