

# Preface

## THE IMPETUS FOR THIS HANDBOOK

The development of the life course as a field of study parallels in some respects another prominent subfield of sociology, social psychology. In his now-classic assessment, House (1977) observed that social psychology's highly general and abstract concepts are well suited to elucidate a broad range of phenomena. As a result, however, social psychological theorizing and research had tended to "dissipate" across several academic disciplines and many applied areas of research. These circumstances presented a challenge to social psychologists in their efforts to maintain a core identity and to evaluate the development of their field.

A similar situation may be said to characterize the contemporary literature surrounding the life course. As a concept, the life course refers to the age-graded, socially-embedded sequence of roles that connect the phases of life. As a paradigm, the life course refers to an imaginative framework comprised of a set of interrelated presuppositions, concepts, and methods that are used to study these age-graded, socially embedded roles. In this relatively new subfield of the social sciences, a common core of generalized concepts and premises is now taking hold and giving definite form to the life course paradigm. As with social psychology, the generalized nature of this paradigm has led to its diffusion across diverse problem areas. Indeed, the utility of the life course for the study of a wide range of temporally structured phenomena is clearly demonstrated by the contributions to this volume from leading specialists in their subfields.

Further paralleling the circumstances of social psychology, academic infrastructures are not conducive to the recognition and development of life course studies as a field. Academic specializations, departments, professional societies, and scholarly journals all tend to promote a focus on single age groups or particular life phases (e.g., adolescence or old age). This emphasis is not in accord with the life course paradigm's central premise—that no period of life can be understood in isolation from people's prior experiences, as well as their aspirations for the future. Thus, whereas the life course has proven highly useful in the study of lives, it likewise tends toward the "organizationally challenged."

In this context, a handbook becomes especially important because it provides, in one place, an overview of key theoretical perspectives, concepts, and methodological approaches that,

while applied to diverse phenomena, are united in their general approach to the study of lives across age phases. Consideration of the life course in this more unified manner heightens sensitivity to the ways that theoretical insights and methods can be fruitfully applied to multiple life phases and the transitions between them. As a result, the similarities, parallels, and linkages between phases of life are revealed and new conceptualizations and hypotheses are suggested. The purpose of this handbook is thus to survey the wide terrain of life course studies with dual emphases on theory and empirical research; in doing so, the handbook allows us to take stock of probative concepts and methods and to identify promising avenues for future research.

## **THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS HANDBOOK: OVERVIEW**

We begin with an essay by Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe. In his diverse empirical studies—encompassing children growing up during the Great Depression, men encountering World War II, and youth negotiating adolescence during the Farm Crisis of the 1980s—Elder made and continues to make seminal contributions to the founding and development of life course studies. In Chapter 1, the authors examine the historical emergence of the life course paradigm, the many rich streams of thought that this paradigm synthesizes, and the substantial progress that has been made. Elder and his colleagues' principles of life course analysis, synthesized in this initial chapter, will continue to guide future generations of life course scholars.

The chapters then proceed from the consideration of macro- to micro-level phenomena, paralleling the multilevel and multifaceted features and determinants of the life course in modern and post-modern societies. Whereas the parts of the *Handbook* proceed from the macro—encompassing social change and changes in age-graded institutions and the organization of age-graded roles—to the micro—focusing on the regulatory influences of social institutions and people's responses to these forces—this division of scholarship is based on prominent themes in the authors' contributions and does not capture the full richness of their work. Although we found the macro–micro continuum to be the most useful organizing principle, most studies of the life course reflect a more holistic perspective. Investigators consider in tandem the connections among social change, the changing nature of age-graded institutions, the organization of age-graded roles, and how the life course is experienced by individuals and groups. These actors are not only imbued with regulatory forces of the social order, but also active agents who respond to them.

Part II of the *Handbook* focuses on variability in the life course across historical and cross-national settings. The chapters in this section share a common concern for how the organization of lives varies across societies defined by history and geography. Part III addresses the normative age-grading of the life course, which is thought to reflect the demands and opportunities of societal structures. This focal point reflects a primary interest in the social psychology of social norms, with emphasis on how norms gain or lose their force with broader social change. Part IV considers how the life course reflects societal institutions. That is, how do enduring, purposive patterns of social organizations and relationships shape the age-graded phases of life and their interconnections? This overarching question is addressed through studies of the family, schools, the workplace, governments, and the connections among these institutions.

There is now widespread appreciation that people are not passive recipients of the social order, as reflected in many contributions throughout this volume. Part V considers how the life course is constructed by motivation and diverse processes that serve to unify experiences

from childhood into old age and, in some instances, promote discontinuities. The chapters focus on individual-level processes, unlike the collective and group-level processes suggested by the contributions to Parts II, III, and IV. Part VI addresses methodological advances and different disciplinary perspectives that are well suited to the study of the life course. All of the contributors urge further sophistication in research, whether through the use of more refined methods or the development of more inclusive conceptual models through interdisciplinary collaborations.

Finally, we have invited senior scholars to reflect on the future of the life course as a multilevel phenomenon and as a field of academic inquiry. Studies of the life course are fundamentally about social change and the biography, and these contributors consider the ways in which the life course and its study are changing. The contributions to this final section make abundantly clear that while much has been accomplished in the science of the life course, the inevitable and often unpredictable nature of social change calls for increasingly complex models of how lives are organized through time.

*Part II. Historical and Cross-National Variability.* In Chapter 2, Alwin and McCammon provide an overview of research on generations, focusing on how age groups both reflect social forces and are social forces in their own right, producing historical change through time. In doing so, they provide fresh insights about the long-standing sociological interest in the generational basis for social stability and change. Their assessment of the historical use and controversy over the term “generation” also does much to clarify terminological confusion. In Chapter 3, Kariya and Rosenbaum develop a model of stratified incentives to explain differences between American and Japanese students, and among Japanese students through historical time. They provide evidence that different structural arrangements linking schools and work can lead to different incentives for achievement. In the case of Japan, educational reforms altered the incentive structure to the (unintentional) disadvantage of the lower socioeconomic strata. Historical shifts, and their implications for the life course, are addressed in many other selections throughout the volume, especially the chapters by Settersten (on age grading), Putney and Bengtson (with respect to the family), Heinz and Moen (regarding work), and Leisering and Weymann (assessing change in state regulation). Furthermore, essays examining the future of the life course, placed at the end of this volume, reflect the ubiquity of historical variation in the life courses of successive cohorts.

*Part III: Normative Structuring.* Part III of the *Handbook* considers the normative age grading of the life course. In Chapter 4, Settersten examines both formal and informal age structuring and historical change in the age differentiation of societies through time. Of central interest in his essay are long-term controversies over the existence and content of age norms and their consequences—both objective and subjective—for persons who manifest “untimely” behavior as modern societies become increasingly “de-chronologized.”

*Part IV: Movement through the Life Course.* Part IV of the *Handbook* examines the institutional structuring of lives, which is at the core of life course analysis in sociology. Institutional contexts 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. Tallman (Chapter 5), Uhlenberg and Mueller (Chapter 6), and Putney and Bengtson (Chapter 7) assess institutional structuring in the context of the family. Pallas (Chapter 8) addresses educational pathways and their consequences, and Heinz (Chapter 9) examines the changing institution of work. Leisering (Chapter 10) notes the many ways that governmental institutions structure the life courses of the citizenry, and attempt to assuage life course risks.

Because lives are structured as persons move within, across, and through institutional settings, the character of the *interinstitutional* linkages between them are exceedingly important.

Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (Chapter 11) examine the process of entry to school, a key transition in a child's life between family and education. Kerckhoff (Chapter 12) highlights the variability of the school-to-work transition across industrial societies. Moen (Chapter 13) notes that the exit from work occurs relatively early in contemporary societies when compared to prior historical periods. In fact, she proclaims the emergence of a new "midcourse" life stage, perhaps representing the most recent addition to the long-term historical differentiation of the life course.

Whereas institutions may be considered key contexts for the unfolding of lives, persons often diverge from institutional pathways or from patterns that would be predicted from their social locations or prior trajectories. Elder's life course principle of "life long openness" is recognized by Sampson and Laub (Chapter 14) and Uggen and Massoglia (Chapter 15), who assess processes of desistance from crime. Furthermore, Jasso (Chapter 16) considers immigration as a major turning point in the life course. Many of the analyses in Part IV bear in direct and important ways on policy issues surrounding how families, workplaces, and schools can be coordinated, as well as the possible roles that the state may play in this coordination.

*Part V. Life Course Construction.* Life course pathways, trajectories, and transitions manifest much variability in pluralistic, contemporary societies. Despite this variability across persons, and increasing individualization of the life course (Shanahan, 2000), continuity is often found to be the predominant feature of individual psychological and behavioral trajectories, including those describing substance use (Schulenberg, Maggs, and O'Malley, Chapter 19) and socioeconomic attainment (Mortimer, Staff, and Oesterle, Chapter 20) from adolescence to adulthood. Understanding the social and psychological processes that underly this stability is a central objective of life course analysis (McLeod and Almazan, Chapter 18; also Alwin and McCammon Chapter 2), implicating the self (Gecas, Chapter 17) as well as the operations of key social structures (see Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson, Chapter 11; Kariya and Rosenbaum, Chapter 3). Turning points, involving alterations of long-term trajectories, also occur, as demonstrated by Sampson and Laub and Uggen and Massoglia.

*Part VI. Methods and Interdisciplinary Approaches.* As scholars pursue these complex themes, increasingly sophisticated methods, statistics, and conceptual models will be needed. Glenn (Chapter 21) presents an accessible overview of the age-period-cohort identification problem, arguing that their unique effects cannot be estimated with precision. Rather, side-information that illuminates developmental and historical processes must be used. Wu (Chapter 22) comprehensively reviews event-history models, which have long played an important role in life course research. As he notes, these models are becoming increasingly sophisticated and new developments will undoubtedly create opportunities to address previously unexplored research questions.

Halaby (Chapter 23) considers recent developments in the analysis of panel data, arguing forcefully for more attention to modeling strategies when using data with repeated measures. His examples illustrate that model specification is a substantive issue, and as models become increasingly complex, care must be exercised to insure that the estimated model is based on reasonable assumptions about the nature of the variables and the processes by which they are interrelated. Macmillan and Eliason (Chapter 24) provide an overview of latent class models. They maintain that these models offer new and exciting opportunities to identify multifaceted pathways and trajectories in the life course, illustrating their argument with a fascinating model of the transition to adulthood. Finally, Cohler and Hostetler (Chapter 25) discuss the use of narrative methods to discern the meanings that social changes have for individuals. They illustrate their sophisticated treatment with a study of American gay men who have negotiated the challenges and opportunities of the late 20th century. While the

*Handbook* only touches the surface of the rich array of extant quantitative, and especially, qualitative methods that elucidate the life course, the availability of authors and limitations of space precluded more widespread coverage.

Several contributions explore the relevance of “neighboring disciplines” for interdisciplinary research. Roberts, Robins, Caspi, and Trzesniewski (Chapter 26) consider recent advances in personality psychology and their connections to life course issues. Life course sociologists have a long-standing interest in such concerns, especially since Caspi and Elder’s pathbreaking research on personality across the life course. Their chapter focuses on how dimensions of personality and attributes of the life course may be reciprocally interrelated and exhibit elements of both continuity and discontinuity. Shanahan, Hofer, and Shanahan (Chapter 27) consider the possible intersections between life course research and biological models of behavior. There is much excitement in the media and scientific forums about continuing advances in the biological sciences. They identify points of integration between biological models and the life course at a conceptual level, but also urge avoiding “the twin dangers of destructive cynicism and gullible expectations.” Finally, Frytak, Harley, and Finch (Chapter 28) promote the integration of social models of human health and life course thinking. The authors argue that human health, and especially, inequality in health-related resources and outcomes, cannot be fully understood without reference to prior experience and dynamic patterns of social and human capital formation.

*Part VII. The Future of the Life Course.* At the beginning of the 21st century, there is no indication that radical social changes, and their impacts on human lives, will abate. Indeed, although every generation claims as much, many of the contributors believe that ongoing structural forces point to the acceleration of change at the turn of the millennium: the globalization of economic, political, organizational, technological, and cultural facets of life; the intermixing of peoples through travel, migration, and ever more rapid and convenient communications; and the on-going development of new technologies (Anderson, 2002). Changes that are already in process, coupled with those on the horizon, will likely alter all the phenomena with which this book deals (the anthology edited by Mortimer and Larson, 2002, addresses institutional changes affecting adolescence and the transition to adulthood).

Prominent sociologists of the life course, including Dale Dannefer, Frank Furstenberg, Linda George, Dennis Hogan and Francis Goldscheider, Angela O’Rand, and Ansgar Weymann, consider future developments and prospects (Chapters 29–34). While these scholars address a wide range of issues and developments in life course studies, they all note the challenges to our field posed by high levels of differentiation and inequality in life course options and outcomes. Dale Dannefer urges life course researchers to move beyond the confines of Western modern societies, extending our conceptual apparatus and empirical studies to the impoverished life courses of most inhabitants of developing societies across the world. Frank Furstenberg highlights the social class differentiation in contemporary American lives and life chances, encompassing family, educational, and work trajectories. Linda George notes the difficulties of explanation, particularly in distinguishing social selection from social causation, in a context of high levels of heterogeneity and the exercise of individual agency. Dennis Hogan and Francis Goldscheider relate how the growing integration of life course and population studies have contributed to the theoretical and methodological development of demography. They feature lifetime benefits and costs of economic behaviors in contemporary research on families and welfare. Angela O’Rand considers the movement from retirement pensions to individually managed accounts as increasing individual risk and jeopardizing economic well-being in old age. Ansgar Weymann emphasizes that governmental regulation has traditionally sought to minimize these and other major life course risks. He asks whether the



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