

BOOK REVIEW

Handbook of the Life Course, Volume II

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There are three, partially overlapping sets of expectations with which I set out to examine the second volume of the Handbook of the Life Course. The first set of expectations derives from my own specialties and interests in the study of the life course. I entered the study of the life course primarily because I wanted to unravel the mechanisms generating inequalities between the family of origin and later life and thereby the structure of opportunities in a given society. Since inequalities and inequalities of opportunities play out in the educational system and the labour market, this brought me to view the life course as a set of interrelated institutionalised sequences as educational trajectories, occupational careers and family roles as well as a sequence of roles in relation to the (welfare-)state rather than age roles or life phases. The interest of life courses as the playing ground for inequalities also leads to the comparative interest in historical or cross-national life course regimes. Do we learn more about the effect of politics and policies on life courses in contrast to specific conditions and transitions?

The second set I formulated as the standards of measuring progress in my review article on new trends in the study of the life course (ARS 2009: 413-433): Is there progress in testable and tested theories rather than heuristics? How well-specified are the intersections between organismic and psychological development and socially embedded life courses? Are there new methods overcoming the fragmentary view of successive events? Are we learning more about conditions in early life as distal rather than proximate and immediate causes? What have we learned about the alleged general trends in life courses such as de-standardisation and pluralisation?

The third set of expectations follows some of my criticisms of the first volume of the Handbook (Social Forces 2003). Then I noted a number of conspicuous omissions like aging, longitudinal data collections and inputs from economics and too little on cross-national institutional variation and policy impacts. I also complained about the lack of separate and more complete name register.

In sum, what I was eager to find were theories rather than concepts and heuristics, corroborated results rather than hypotheses or illustrative findings, mechanisms rather than associations, interdisciplinary rather than disciplinary breakthroughs, historical and national specificity rather than universals, institutional structures rather than age norms. I also was curious how US-centric the handbook would turn out to be. And of course I wanted to learn truly new stuff.

In their introduction Shanahan, Mortimer and Johnson not only define the differing philosophies guiding the second and the first handbook (forward-looking and future oriented vs summary review of state of the art), but also chart the outburst of publications in the area and very usefully collect the recommendations for the future of life course studies made in the 31 contributed chapters. The five overall headings (I: Foundations of Life Course Studies and Future Studies, II: Changing Social Contexts and Life Course Patterns, III: Health and Development through the Life Course, IV: Life Course Methodologies , and, V: The Life Course and Policy: Building the Nexus) are only partially informative and, in some cases, clearly do not work well. For instance, the systematic and excellent review by Hagestrand and Dykstra on social policies impacting on the life course would have fitted much better in part V and

the piece by Wadsworth and Kuh on 'Epidemiological Perspectives on the Life Course' much better in part III.

In the introductory chapter the editors also reiterate the concept of the life course as "age-graded roles that structure the (or create patterns) in the biography". This still carries the functionalist baggage of (normative) age roles and life phases and clearly misdirects many of the chapter authors. This is the case, for instance, when Phyllis Moen in her chapter on work starts from the tripartite life course and looks at work as a life phase ("master life course status") rather than work life mobility as job and occupational careers. Above all, the editors stick to the idea of the life course 'paradigm' and obviously authors were instructed to follow Glen Elder's five heuristic principles. I think it is Glen Elder's great merit to have triggered the take off of life course studies by formulating them. But in many chapters we find an 'o mani padme hum' of these principles as mere thematic rubrics – very often much below the level of sophistication of its inventor. It is then the question whether the outburst of publications was associated with a corresponding outburst of theories, findings and methods..

Both the quality and the genre of the 34 chapters are very uneven. They range from (too many) mostly suggestive essays (e.g. Dannefer et.al., Hitlin and Kwon, London and Wilmoth, Mortimer and Moen) to detailed findings concentrating on just single or a few studies – mostly the ones of the authors themselves (Elder/George, Thornberry, Hermanowicz, Macmillan and Furstenberg) to textbook like treatises (Moore/Brand) .

But let me start in a more positive and constructive spirit with a number of very impressive highlights. John Bynner's excellent chapter on the huge importance of the growing and accumulating number of longitudinal studies argues rightly how such research enterprises were and will be crucial in institutionalising life course research as an emergent field. The chapter gives a very good overview of older and current studies and, not least, identifies the incorporation of new kinds of data (like biomarkers and geocoded data) and the challenges in regard to funding, attrition and response burden. He might have, though, added a more sober reflection about the astonishingly modest yield of, for instance, the longest running

British cohort studies. The chapter by Kalil, Duncan and Ziolo-Guest on the short and long-term consequences of early childhood poverty – especially in regard to health – is not only the shortest, but also the most brilliant contribution. It is theoretically highly developed – e.g. with the distinction between transient and persistent poverty or the importance age sensitivity – and provides an excellent review of empirical and methodological progress in the area. Rather than just suggesting life course effects it gives precise information about effect sizes as well and goes a long way to specifying the causal mechanisms (like family and environmental stress, allostatic load). And it does not – like many chapters in the handbook – just suggest the strengths of life course linkages, but – by reporting on results from large scale interventions and experiments, among other things – also discusses modest or no effects.

Similarly impressive is the chapter by father and daughters Blossfeld on changes in educational inequality in cross-national perspective which uses the OECD-PIACC data on 22 countries to empirically test competing theories (modernisation, cultural reproduction) of trends in inequality of educational opportunity. In a further breakthrough in the area of cross-national life course studies Hagestad and Dykstra not only highlight the difference between US and European traditions on gendered life courses, but also provide a systematic and very fruitful overview of age related social policies. This is well complemented by the both analytical and informative chapter by Pamela Herd On 'Influences of Social Welfare Policies on Health Disparities Across the Life Course'. In regard to theory development Martin Diewald brings together two strands from the previous handbook: on the one hand the explication of risk by O'Rand and the idea of policies as life course risk management by Leisering. Diewald very fruitfully takes up the distinction between risk and adversity and expands on DiPrete's country specifications as systems which either prevent risks (Germany) or deal with adversity, but allow risk (Sweden) or fail in both respects (US). Not least he reconnects these concepts with Tilly's ideas on relational stratification.

Probably the greatest progress of the handbook is documenting and where it also most informative is in the area of health. In addition to the already

mentioned chapter on the effects on early poverty on later life Kalil et al. and the impressive piece by Wadsworth and Kuh on epidemiological perspectives on the life course life, Hayward and Sheehan in their chapter 'Does the body forget? Adult Health, Life Course Dynamics and Social Change' stress the importance of taking a comprehensive view of health change encompassing biological risk, morbidity, functioning, disability and mortality and of using a biologically informed framework for early gains or deficits in capacity as well as differential functional decline in adulthood and old age. One very important contribution of this chapter is the discussion and detailed documentation of the specificity of the historical contexts and thus of social change for health development across the life course. Johnson et.al. and Ferraro in their respective chapters trace two important connections between health and life course: education and aging. Johnson et.al. unravel the multiple ways in which education affects health such as differences in risky behaviour, life styles, differential health knowledge and the indirect linkages between education and health via social support, employment and work and income. Ferraro takes on the Fries/Manton controversy on compression of morbidity by showing that the extension of healthier life is most likely quite different for different kinds of diseases and that the available evidence points more to an extension of survival after the onset of disability rather than compression of morbidity.

Duan Alwin and his co-authors contribute an empirically well-informed as well as theoretically very reflective and methodologically sophisticated chapter on 'Cognitive Development and the Life Course: Growth, Stability and Decline'. They rightly note that developmentalists like Baltes and Bronfenbrenner have treated the environment and especially the institutional characteristics of life courses in a residual fashion. In their own discussion they want to remedy this deficit by focusing on the effects on cognitive ability by educational transitions, transition to adulthood, adulthood retirement an old age. One noteworthy point is that they are actually refuting the celebrated finding by Kohn and Schooler on the impact of occupational flexibility and corresponding trajectories on cognitive function as an artefact. It is

unfortunate that in their literature review they miss what I take to be the most impressive evidence on the relationship between institutional macrostructures and cognitive outcomes, namely the study by Rohwedder and Willis on 'Mental Retirement' (Journal of Economic Perspectives 24 (1), 2010 119-38) where these authors show how 'national' reforms in extending the age of retirement delay aggregate cognitive decline.

I was looking forward to read the chapters on the 'new' topics of criminal behaviour, disaster, agency, mental health and longitudinal qualitative studies but found them all relatively disappointing. Both the chapters by Wakefield and Apel and by Laub on criminal behaviour in the life course do not add much if anything beyond the chapters by Sampson and Laub and Uggen and Massaglia in the first handbook. The chapter on latent growth model by Macmillan and Furstenberg is very helpful even to one like myself who used the method, but trajectories of the body mass index (BMI) are probably not the most salient application – income or status trajectories would have been more central. A very curious omission – now in both handbooks – is a chapter on sequence analysis, a method which has made great progress and found many applications in recent years.

One criterion against which to measure some of the contributions to the handbook is whether they live up to the state of the art in the respective disciplines and go beyond it by bringing their fields into the life course arena. This clearly succeeded well in the chapters close to family demography by Hofferth and Goldscheider, the one close to social policy by Hagestad and Dykstra and the one close to developmental psychology by Alwin and co-authors. But I found the chapters on education by Crosnoe and Benner and – as already mentioned – the one on work by Moen not up to what has already been accomplished in their 'home' disciplines. An innovative and important contribution from which I learned a lot about developments in the US proved to be the chapter by Zapata-Gietl and co-authors on the new life phase of 'college for all'. It could have benefitted, however, from comparisons with other countries where – despite huge institutional differences – this life phase after high school seems similarly 'floating'. Focusing on the interdependencies between physical development, cognitive skills and psychosocial development the

chapter by Paul Dornan on the 'Young Lives Study' following cohorts from age one to age 15 and from age eight to age 22 in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam is a real breakthrough in life course research going beyond advanced societies.

One last note relates to the issue of trends covered in various ways in the chapters by Dannefer et al., Elder and George, Mortimer and Moen, and O'Rand and Bostic. There is a tendency to stress the negative effects of globalisation, increasing 'precariousness' and vulnerability. Although this accords well with the 'social problem' tradition of sociology I found both the explication of these processes and the alleged evidence lacking.

All in all, like the first edition, the Handbook of the Life Course, Volume II is an impressive accomplishment for which the editors can only be congratulated. It shows, however, a puzzling combination of accumulation, innovation and stagnation in this field. The explosive burst of publications is clearly not matched by corresponding progress in theory development and the accumulation of corroborated findings. And – again – both a name and a subject register would have been useful.