

## BOOK REVIEWS

### The Craft of Life Course Research

Glen H. Elder, Jr. & Janet Z. Giele (Eds) 2009

New York & London: Guilford Press

372pp

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Elder and Giele have assembled 13 chapters that convey both the excitement and the manifold challenges of life course research. Researchers who have guided exemplary, long-term research programs demonstrate how basic principles of life course analysis are investigated, how questions are reframed in temporal perspective, and how multiple data sources can be used to address them. Moreover, the book provides an invaluable introduction to key life course archives in the United States and Europe, many of which are now publicly available.

Unlike standard methods texts, which typically feature research methods or statistical techniques with only brief substantive examples, this reader illuminates the actual work of the life course researcher from the specification of research questions to data analysis and interpretation. The selections illustrate the issues, dilemmas, and decisions that are usually not part of published journal articles, or even books. They point to the ways in which questions must be formulated when temporal, life course processes are of central interest; how data, often collected for very different purposes, may be recast to answer such questions, and the special challenges of longitudinal data analysis. Its revelation of the many considerations and decisions that generally take place “behind the scenes,” often prior to the initiation of a systematic investigation, make this book invaluable for students.

Elder and Giele overview the historical development of the life course paradigm and summarize Elder’s basic principles of life course analysis (e.g. historical time and place, social embeddedness, agency, etc.). This first chapter provides a solid introduction for the student who is new to life course studies. The remainder of the book is divided into three sections that roughly parallel the chronology of empirical research.

Hauser begins the first section, on *Methods of Data Collection*, with an informative historical account of the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, which has followed a 1939 birth cohort from adolescence through the early 70’s. He summarizes its early contributions to the understanding of intergenerational mobility and its subsequent extensions to many other questions of interest to life course researchers, most notably, the linkages between life trajectories and health in the latter phases of life. Hauser illuminates the rationales for key design decisions involving additions to the data archive - to include friends and siblings of the cohort as well as DNA. This chapter convincingly demonstrates the value of the Wisconsin data as a resource to examine a multitude of life course questions.

Hogan and Spearin demonstrate the potential of life records by featuring Kertzer and Hogan’s fascinating study of the life paths of residents of an Italian town from 1861-1921, drawing on census, tax, baptismal, marriage, and migration records. While carefully noting the limitations of life records (e.g. incompleteness, matching difficulties, etc.) and sensitizing the researcher to ethical dilemmas (e.g. involving privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent), the authors provide excellent reasons to add life records to the life course researcher’s toolbox, which may usefully supplement self-reports in survey panel studies.

Burton, Purvin, and Garrett-Peters draw on the Three-City Study of abuse of low-income mothers to illustrate the power of longitudinal ethnography in a multi-method research program. The authors show how the ethnographers stimulated discourses on abuse which emerged naturally in the context of interactions and ongoing discussions. The prevalence (64% were sexually or physically abused in childhood, adulthood, or both) and traumatic character of abusive experiences necessitated procedures to address “vicarious trauma” experienced by the researchers, as well as the safety of fieldworkers and participants.

Elder and Taylor show how to “breathe new life” into longitudinal archives, by recasting data to extend their relevance well beyond the goals of the original researchers and by supplementing earlier data

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collection efforts with other records and contemporary follow-ups. They provide several examples, including the Terman study of gifted children, recast to describe life course trajectories of health; Glueck's study of juvenile delinquency (by Laub and Sampson), to reveal life course patterns of desistance from criminality; and the National Long-Term Care Survey, to understand linkages between earlier chronic conditions and later disability.

Part II, *Measuring Life Course Dynamics*, leads off with George's exceedingly thoughtful exposition of the study of cumulative life course processes, featuring hierarchical linear models and latent class analyses. Her careful distinction between person level differences and within person changes, and how these can be separated analytically, will be fully comprehensible to students with only rudimentary statistical backgrounds. Using the Glueck data on delinquent and Boston males (a cohort born between 1925-32 that was followed to age 32 by the original investigators and at age 70 by Sampson and Laub), Doherty, Laub and Sampson provide further illustration of the power of group-based trajectories in understanding patterns of criminality across the life course. They identify six offending trajectories, five incarceration trajectories, and the relations between them.

Almeida's and Wong's chapter on life transitions and daily stressor exposure illustrates the use of daily diaries from the longitudinal National Study of Daily Experiences (with two waves of data from a nationally representative general population survey—the Midlife in the United States, or MIDUS study of adults—spanning a 10 year period), as well as the stressors distinguishing different age cohorts (early and late Baby Boomers). Their research links daily stress processes to basic principles of life course analysis—historical time and place, interdependent lives, human agency, and timing.

Part III, *Investigating Explanatory Factors*, begins with the perennial question of nature vs. nurture. Shanahan and Boardman examine how the combination of genetic makeup and social experience influences behavioral trajectories through the life course. For example, boys with a "risky" gene and low social capital (as measured by parental SES and school involvement) are especially unlikely to pursue their educations beyond high school (30% do so);

those who have the more salutary genetic makeup and high social capital are the most likely (75%). This chapter constitutes a rousing "call to arms" to social scientists to join with geneticists in the study of person-environment interactions: how genetic makeup conditions the effects of cumulative environmental exposures on life course trajectories, or, conversely, how the cumulative history of experience, conditions phenotypic expression of genetically determined potentials. Their presentation of strategies for studying gene-environment interplay will be exceedingly useful to those who wish to join them in this innovative research.

Giele tackles the perennial question of why some members of disadvantaged groups transcend the stereotypes associated with their ascriptive statuses, achieving success despite the odds. She shows how the life story method can address this question through careful selection of cases, collection of retrospective data, attentiveness to attributes of the cases, and comparative analysis (inspired by Ragin's methods). Her study of 48 college-educated African American and White women indicates distinctive aspects of identity, choice of marital partners, work motivation, and adaptation to change that promoted their success and differed by race.

Moen's and Hernandez's shift of focus to relational data is especially welcome given the field's heavy reliance on individual-level data. Their comprehensive review of existing research on relational dynamics over time, shows how new questions can be addressed by taking a relational perspective. By constructing truly relational, couple-level measures, the researcher can explore the demographic determinants of relational trajectories, as well as the strategic adaptations that couples make over time (e.g. work and family decision-making). Also of great interest in relational studies are cross-over effects, how each member of a pair influences the other.

In the concluding chapter, Blossfeld discusses the pronounced advantages of longitudinal data over cross-sectional data for causal comparative analysis (in elucidating age, period, and cohort effects; national life event timetables; and contextual processes at multiple levels). The kinds of questions amenable to longitudinal cross-national study are illustrated by his comparative studies involving 9 to

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5 countries. He addresses the problem of generality (e.g. in mobility and family formation patterns), and underscores the importance of variation in institutional structures (e.g. education, work, school-to-work regimes, welfare policy, and family). His concluding discussion of young people's responses to the uncertainties posed by globalization is particularly insightful.

This collection should be on the shelf of all social scientists who study life course processes. The chapters' clarity, accessibility and unique contributions, and the superb balance of quantitative and qualitative approaches, make this collection a highly useful supplement for graduate and advanced undergraduate courses on the life course, as well as courses on methodology and data analysis.

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## The Life Course Reader: Individuals and Societies Across Time

**Walter R. Heinz, Johannes Huinink & Ansgar Weymann** (Eds) 2009  
Frankfurt: Campus Verlag,  
591pp  
ISBN 978-3-593-38805-2.

The purpose of this collection is 'to present the life course as a field of innovative interdisciplinary research on the interrelationships between social structure, institutions and biographies across time.' It brings together 24 contributions from different sources: mainly from Germany and the US, but also from other European countries. Almost all the papers have been previously published in journals or books, but they are tied together by a series of excellent introductions to the different sections. The volume combines discussion of theoretical considerations of life course research and its different concepts with some empirical applications. It amply fulfils its function as a reader, i.e. as a volume which gives a good sense of the scope of the field and how research in it is conducted. Working through this set of papers would give anyone a good grasp of the key issues

involved, and the challenges facing those of us who grapple with life course research.

As the volume repeatedly argues, this is an inherently multi-dimensional field. The number of factors, levels, contexts, institutions and interdependences which should, ideally, be brought into the picture is almost overwhelming. Successive authors make their case for a specific approach, often with overlapping but not identical frameworks. No single study, or even programme of study, could possibly encompass the full range of dimensions; but the volume provides substantial backing to the argument that the patterns of individual lives can only be grasped at all by approaches which take account of at least several of the dimensions. Although the theoretical discussions are at times heavy going, the effect overall is a strong counterblast to those narrow and often desiccated analyses which abstract human behaviour from its spatial and above all temporal context. There are several trenchant critiques of over-rationalised approaches to how people lead their lives, and a welcome rejection of fixed stages in favour of a dynamic approach to transitions and trajectories.

One of the valuable features of the collection is the perspective it gives on how the field has itself evolved over time. It opens with a 1964 piece by Leonard Cain which looks back further to Mannheim's career stage theory. Amongst other things, this highlights the relevance of legal and religious factors in defining the life course – factors which remain relevant today, though in a different light. Many of the pieces are classics from the 1980s and the 1990s; naturally there have been significant changes in important contextual features such as the labour market, but the contributions both remind us of issues which continue to shape the debate, and challenge us to update the debate as we read them. There are a number of recurrent tensions which appear consistently, for example between standardisation and de-standardisation of the life course: in what senses does the individual have more choice and control over their own trajectories and sequences than before, and how has the influence of institutional context changed in relation to this? This and other issues take different forms as the context changes.

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Some striking cultural differences emerge. Most evident is the emphasis placed, often self-consciously, by many of the German contributors on the power of the labour market as a structuring factor, in respect of individual life courses generally, but also as a factor which heavily differentiates male from female patterns. Of course this differentiation occurs in every society, but the way employment interacts with the welfare state to shape gender differentiation over the life course is particularly strong in Germany.

There are few definitive answers given here to how human life courses are determined or shaped, even within a single culture. Instead we find a whole panoply of concepts and analyses. But the universal thread running through is the need to combine different approaches. As several contributors observe, life course studies depend on, but also complement, longitudinal research. They build in biographical and institutional elements, so that the powerful insights of cohort studies can be contextualised and nuanced. The field is replete with metaphors and images, and these too are necessary for us to get a better grasp of this protean subject. Gunnhild Hagestad uses the photographic imagery of 'depth of field' to argue for a long view, in portraying individual lives, linked lives and chains of interconnected relationships. This surely is the way forward: to seek combinations of methodology and focus.

We might have benefitted from a few more immediately contemporary contributions to bring the debate right up to date. These might have addressed, for example, the huge implications of the ageing of most western societies and the way this changes the shape of individual life courses and intergenerational relations - touched upon in a couple of papers, but deserving of fuller treatment. But this is a collection of papers which have individually stood the test of time, and which together provide a solid platform for life course researchers at any level.

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## **Children of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The first five years**

**Kirsten Hansen, Heather Joshi and Shirley Dex (Eds)**  
2010

Bristol: Policy Press

320pp

ISBN: 978-1-84742-475-4

The British birth cohort studies stretching back to 1946 started as perinatal mortality surveys of a single week's births in 1946, 1958 and 1970 with subsequent follow-up. The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) 30 years later was conceived in longitudinal and comparative terms from the beginning, maintaining a degree of continuity with the earlier studies while making good limitations in design and measurement scope for contemporary scientific and policy purposes. *Children of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* reports findings for the first three waves of the study: wave 1 at 9 months, wave 2 at age 3 and wave 3 at age 5.

Innovations in the study's design included replacement of all births in a single week by a multi-stage clustered sample comprising 400 electoral wards, within which all babies born over a given period of one year to 18 months were selected for the sample. Other features were disproportionate stratification of the sampled wards to ensure adequate representation of the ethnic minority and disadvantaged groups and boosting the samples in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to double their naturally-occurring size. Respondents included mothers, fathers and by age 2 the infants themselves. Innovations in developmental measurement included cognitive, behavioural and physical development and assessment of the physical and social environment of the family, including parent relations and attitudes. Administrative data from health and education sources was also linked to the record.

The value of this expanded measurement regime is fully manifested in the excellent compendium of findings on contemporary UK child development that the book's 16 chapters present<sup>1</sup>. The repeated measures offer a degree of statistical control on the estimated relationships between child circumstances and child outcomes, enabling authors to home in on the core relationship of interest, and suggest how other confounding and mediating factors play a part in the developmental processes involved.

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Not surprisingly in view of the design strategy, the chapters focus on the *diversity* in circumstances and experience that young children of each gender increasingly encounter in the early stages of growing up. Such a contextual emphasis extends to ethnicity, where eight major ethnic groups had sufficient numbers for analysis. 14 policy related topics are examined (chapter numbers in brackets): child poverty (2) ; ethnicity , community and social capital (3); parental relationships and parenting(4) ; partnership trajectories, parent and child well-being (5); employment trajectories and ethnic diversity(6); neighbourhoods and residential mobility (7); child care in the pre-school years(8); intergenerational inequality in early years assessment (9); ethnic inequalities in child outcomes (10); school choice (11); teacher assessments in the first year of school (12); childhood overweight and obesity(13); resilience in children's development (14); parental and child health(15).

*Disadvantage* shaping child outcomes is a prominent theme throughout. The staggeringly high proportion of families in the disadvantaged category, approximating 30%, has remained stable over the first five years of the children's lives, though not necessarily for the same individuals on each occasion. The distribution has also remained relatively stable across cohorts. In chapter after chapter strong relationships between child circumstances and a cognitive or behavioural outcome reduce, often substantially, when socio-economic status is taken into account.

Another striking feature of child circumstances is the increasing *complexity* of contemporary family forms and family life. Compared with earlier cohorts, the proportion of children growing up in single parent and cohabiting family situations has rocketed, with two-fifths of children at age 5 living with unmarried parents. Capturing these features of development through the idea of family and parent *trajectories* with foundations shifting over time is where the longitudinal design is seen to its best advantage. Such concepts as family economy and resilience to disadvantage and hardship illuminate further the dynamics of the life course in early childhood.

*Intergenerational transfer* is another important aspect. The book presents strong evidence of cycles of disadvantage and advantage mediated through the mechanism of family interaction processes. If anything, breaking loose from these cycles has actually reduced

over the thirty years since the 1970 cohort study. We see inequalities established from the time of birth that increase through the early years, then stabilise at around five, powerfully predicting life chances later on. On the other hand, while outcome prevalence has shifted dramatically on many child indicators, of which overweight and obesity are striking examples, the processes linking circumstance to outcomes, do not appear to be changing in direction or intensity, nor are they immutable. As the chapter concludes, there is much fluidity in child development on which the agency of parents, child care providers, social service and health professionals, and the children themselves can work.

One small criticism of the book is that perhaps more could have been made explicitly of the life course perspective early on, as a means of unifying more clearly the complementary findings reported on the fourteen topics covered. The multi-level structure of the sample, embracing local neighbourhood ecology also merits further exploitation in the examination of neighbourhood ecology effects. In the meantime the authors are to be congratulated on their achievement in producing such a rounded and impressive account of early childhood in the first five years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**John Bynner**

Longview

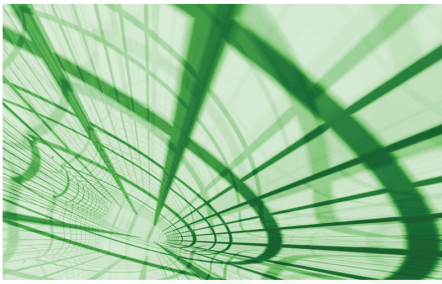
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Full technical details and associated technical reports on the MCS including data access are available on the MCS website:

[www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/text.asp?section=000100020001](http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/text.asp?section=000100020001)



## The Craft of Life Course Research

edited by Glen H. Elder, Jr., and Janet Z. Giele



This book brings together prominent investigators to provide a comprehensive guide to doing life course research, including an "inside view" of how they designed and carried out influential longitudinal studies. Using vivid examples, the contributors trace the connections between early and later experience and reveal how researchers and graduate students can discover these links in their own research. Well-organized chapters describe the best and newest ways to:

- Use surveys, life records, ethnography, and data archives to collect different types of data over years or even decades.
- Apply innovative statistical methods to measure dynamic processes that result in improvement, decline, or reversibility in economic fortunes, stress, health, and criminality.
- Explore the micro- and macro-level explanatory factors that shape individual trajectories, including genetic and environmental interactions, personal life history, interpersonal ties, and sociocultural institutions.

# The Craft of Life Course Research

Edited by **Glen H. Elder, Jr.**, Howard W. Odum Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Research Professor of Psychology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill & **Janet Z. Giele**, Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University

*"This book illuminates the utility of diverse methodologies, from behavioral genetic analysis to cross-national and historical comparison. It is unique in its scope, including qualitative (life story, ethnography, diary) and quantitative (hierarchical growth, latent class, and group-based trajectory models) approaches. Students will learn how to formulate research questions, locate data sources, and increase the potential of existing data through recasting and supplementation. Ideal for methods courses and substantive courses on aging in social context."* - Jeylan T. Mortimer, Life Course Center, Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota

*"This is a most important book in which the quality of the contributors and editors shines through the pages; a major contribution to the life course literature."* - John M. Bynner, Emeritus Professor and former Director, Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education, University of London, United Kingdom

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