A Life Course Perspective (SBH)

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Life course perspective

• Useful way to understand the relationship between time and human behavior.

• Looks at how chronological age, relationships, common life transitions, and social change shape people’s lives from birth to death.

• Characteristics of the person and the environment in which the person lives also play a part
Exhibit 1.1 The Relationship of Person, Environment, and Time

- Environment
  - Physical Environment
  - Culture
  - Social Institutions & Social Structure
  - Dyads
  - Families
  - Small Groups
  - Formal Organizations
  - Communities
  - Social Movements

- Person
  - Biological
  - Psychological
  - Spiritual

- Life Course
  - Life Events
  - Constants, Trends, Cycles, Shifts

- Time
• The life course perspective attempts to understand the continuities as well as the twists and turns in the paths of individual lives.
• It recognizes the influence of historical changes on human behavior.
• The life course perspective recognizes the importance of timing of lives not just in terms of chronological age, but also in terms of biological age, psychological age, social age, and spiritual age.
• It emphasizes the ways in which humans are interdependent and gives special attention to the family as the primary arena for experiencing and interpreting the wider social world.
• This perspective sees humans as capable of making choices and constructing their own life journeys, within systems of opportunities and constraints.

• The life course perspective emphasizes diversity in life journeys and the many sources of that diversity.

• It also recognizes the linkages between childhood and adolescent experiences and later experiences in adulthood.
• Life course is a path but it is not a straight path; it is a path with both continuities and twists and turns.

• If you want to understand a person’s life, you might begin with an event history, or the sequence of significant events, experiences, and transitions in a person’s life from birth to death.

• You might also try to understand a person in terms of how that person’s life has been synchronized with family members’ lives across time.

• Life course also has to be understood in terms of how culture and social institutions shape the pattern of individual lives.
Basic Concepts of the Life Course Perspective

• **Cohorts:** A group of persons who were born at the same historical time and who experience particular social changes within a given culture in the same sequence and at the same age.

• Cohorts differ in size due to natural causes, policies, gender preferences and infanticides, wars, and in and out migrations.

• These differences affect opportunities for education, work, and family life.
• Cohorts develop strategies for the special circumstances they face.
• One way to visualize the configuration of cohorts in a given society is through the use of a population pyramid.
• **Transitions**: A life course perspective is stage-like because it proposes that each person experiences a number of transitions, or changes in roles and statuses that represent a distinct departure from prior roles and statuses.

• Life is full of such transitions: starting school, entering puberty, leaving school, getting a first job, leaving home, retiring, and so on.

• Many transitions relate to family life: marriages, births, divorces, remarriages, deaths.
• Each transition changes family statuses and roles and generally is accompanied by family members’ exits and entrances.

• In a college, for example, students pass through in a steady stream. Some of them make the transition from undergraduate to graduate student, and in that new status they may take on the new role of teaching or research assistant.
• **Trajectories:** The changes involved in transitions are discrete and bounded; when they happen, an old phase of life ends and a new phase begins.

• In contrast, *trajectories* involve a longer view of long-term patterns of stability and change in a person’s life, involving multiple transitions.

• We do not necessarily expect trajectories to be a straight line, but we do expect them to have some continuity of direction.
• For example, once a person becomes addicted to alcohol, he sets forth on a path of increased use of alcohol and deteriorating ability to uphold his responsibilities, with multiple transitions involving family disruption and job instability.

• Because individuals and families live their lives in multiple spheres, their lives are made up of multiple, intersecting trajectories—such as educational trajectories, family life trajectories, health trajectories, and work trajectories.
• **Life Events:** Significant occurrence involving a relatively abrupt change that may produce serious and long-lasting effects.

• The term refers to the happening itself and not to the transitions that will occur because of the happening.

• A transition is a more gradual change that occurs with a life event.
• Life events inventories are not finely tuned. One suggestion is to classify life events along several dimensions: “major versus minor, anticipated versus unanticipated, controllable versus uncontrollable, typical versus atypical, desirable versus undesirable, acute versus chronic.”

• Specific life events have different meanings to various individuals and to various collectivities.

• Women report more vivid memories of life events in relationships than men report.
• **Turning Points:** A point in the life course that represents a substantial change or discontinuity in direction; it serves as a lasting change and not just a temporary detour. As significant as they are to individuals’ lives, turning points usually become obvious only as time passes.

• For example, someone who is addicted to alcohol to continue to organize his or her life around that substance unless some event becomes a turning point for recovery.
Three types of life events can serve as turning points:

a. 1. Life events that either close or open opportunities

b. 2. Life events that make a lasting change on the person’s environment

c. 3. Life events that change a person’s self-concept, beliefs, or expectations
• Migration to a new country, are momentous because they qualify as all three types of events.

• Migration, whether voluntary or involuntary, certainly makes a lasting change on the environment in which the person lives; it may also close and open opportunities and cause a change in self-concept and beliefs.
• Less dramatic transitions may also become turning points, depending on the individual’s assessment of its importance.

**A transition can become a turning point under five conditions:**

• When the transition occurs simultaneously with a crisis or is followed by a crisis.

• When the transition involves family conflict over the needs and wants of individuals and the greater good of the family unit.
• When the transition is “off-time,” meaning that it does not occur at the typical stage in life
• When the transition is followed by unforeseen negative consequences.
• When the transition requires exceptional social adjustments.
Major Themes of the Life Course Perspective

1. Interplay of Human Lives and Historical Time:
   • Persons born in different years face different historical worlds, with different options and constraints—especially in rapidly changing societies.
   • Historical time may produce cohort effects when distinctive formative experiences are shared at the same point in the life course and have a lasting impact on a birth cohort.
Changes in social institutions and their policies impinge on family and individual life course trajectories. e.g. the lag between social change and the development of public policy to respond to the new circumstances and the needs that arise with social change like the lag between trends in employment among mothers and public policy regarding child care during infancy and early childhood.
2. Timing of Lives:

- Every society appears to use age as an important variable, and many social institutions in advanced industrial societies are organized, in part, around age—the age for starting school, the age of majority, retirement age, and so on.

- They may classify entrances and exits from particular statuses and roles as “off-time” or “on time, "based on social norms or shared expectations about the timing of such transitions.
For example, child labor and childbearing in adolescence are considered off-time in modern industrial countries, but in much of the world, such timing of roles is seen as a part of the natural order.
Dimensions of Age: Chronological age itself is not the only factor involved in timing of lives. Age-graded differences in roles and behaviors are the result of biological, psychological, social, and spiritual processes.

- **Biological age** indicates a person’s level of biological development and physical health, as measured by the functioning of the various organ systems.

- **Psychological age** refers to the capacities that people have and the skills they use to adapt to changing biological and environmental demands. Skills in memory, learning, intelligence, motivation, emotions, and how old people perceive themselves to be.
Researchers have also used a more multifaceted way of exploring perceived age as they have distinguished between “feel-age, look-age, do-age, and interests-age”

Men and women attach different social meanings to age and use different guidelines for measuring how old they are.

Culture is another factor in perceptions of age.
Social age refers to the age-graded roles and behaviors expected by society—in other words, the socially constructed meaning of various ages. The concept of age norm is used to indicate the behaviors that are expected of people of a specific age in a given society at a particular point in time. Age norms may be informal expectations, or they may be encoded as formal rules and laws.

Life course scholars suggest that age norms vary not only across historical time and across societies but also by gender, ethnicity, and social class within a given time and society.
• **Standardization in the Timing of Lives:** Different countries have laws and regulations about the age for compulsory education, working (child labor), driving, drinking, being tried as an adult, marrying, holding public office, and receiving pensions and social insurance.
• Formalized age structuring has created a couple of difficulties that affect social workers. One is that cultural lags often lead to a mismatch between changing circumstances and the age structuring in society.

• Consider the trend for corporations to offer early retirement, before the age of 65, in a time when people are living longer and with better health.
• Another problem with the institutionalization of age norms is increasing age segregation; people are spending more of their time in groups consisting entirely of people their own age.

• Social work services are increasingly organized around the settings of these age-segregated groups: schools, the workplace, long-term care.
3. **Linked or Interdependent Lives:** The interdependence of human lives and the ways in which relationships both support and control an individual’s behavior. Relationships also control behavior through expectations, rewards, and punishments.

**Links Between Family Members.**

- The connection between family hardship, family nurturance, and child behaviors is well established.
- Parents provide social capital for their children, in terms of role models and networks of social support. It should also be noted that parents’ lives are influenced by the trajectories of their children’s lives.
Link with the wider world:

• Work has a major effect on family transitions.
• Children whose mothers are in occupations requiring complex skills are less likely to be depressed and behave aggressively than children whose mothers are in less skilled work environments.
• Perhaps performing complex tasks at work enhances parenting skills.
• Differences in the behavior of children and adolescents have been found among families within a given neighborhood than have been found when comparing the families in one neighborhood with families in other neighborhoods.
• Lifestyles of people in affluent countries depend on cheap labor and cheap raw products in poor countries.

• Women migrate from impoverished countries to become domestic laborers in affluent countries allowing women in these countries to take advantage of career opportunities and allowing domestic workers to send money back home to support their own families.
4. Human Agency in making choices: Use of personal power to achieve personal goals. Individual choices are constrained by the structural and cultural arrangements. Social inequalities can result in low self-efficacy and low efficacy expectations among members of oppressed groups.

5. Diversity in life course trajectories: Life course research has been based on samples from affluent societies and fails to account for global diversity. Four themes of life course perspective can be used to recognize diversity;
• **Interplay of human lives and historical time:** Cohorts tend to have different life trajectories because of unique historical events each cohort encounters.

• **Timings of lives:** Age norms change with time and place and culture. Age norms also vary by social location, or place in the social structure of a given society, most notably by gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. These variables create differences from one cohort to another as well as differences among the individuals within a cohort.
- **Linked or independent lives:** The intersection of multiple trajectories—for example, the family lifeline, the educational lifeline, and the work lifeline—introduces new possibilities for diversity in life course patterns.

- **Human Agency in making choices:** Allows for extensive individual differences in life course trajectories as individual plan and make choices between options.
6. Developmental Risk and Protection:

It is not simply the timing and sequencing of hardships but also their duration and spacing that provide risk for youth as they make the transition into adulthood. For instance, poverty alone is much less of a risk than extended poverty. Families are more vulnerable to getting off track when confronted simultaneously by multiple events and transitions.

Life course scholars have borrowed the concepts of cumulative advantage and cumulative disadvantage from sociologist Robert Merton to explain inequality within cohorts across the life course and are socially constructed.
Strengths of the Life Course Perspective

• It pays greater attention to the impact of historical and social change on human behavior, which seems particularly important in a rapidly changing society.
• Its emphasis on linked lives shines a spotlight on intergenerational relationships and the interdependence of lives.
• It acknowledges people’s strengths and capacity for change.
• Life course researchers are also finding strong evidence for the malleability of risk factors and the possibilities for preventive interventions.
• The life course perspective provides a good conceptual framework for culturally sensitive practice.

• The life course perspective lends itself well to research that looks at cumulative advantage and cumulative disadvantage, adding to our knowledge about the impact of power and privilege, and subsequently suggesting strategies for social justice.
Limitations

• Heterogeneity is its biggest challenge.
• The life course perspective has not been used to consider diversity of experiences on a global level. This failure has led some scholars to suggest that the life course perspective, as it currently stands, is a perspective that only applies to affluent and industrial societies.
• Failure to adequately link the micro world of individual and family lives to the macro world of social institutions and formal organizations.