

Life course research: change and inequality over human lives

Given by Juho Härkönen, Professor of Sociology

Tuesday, 11:00 – 13:00

Register [online](#)

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The life course perspective has rapidly become a popular analytical framework for longitudinal analysis in the social sciences as well as neighboring disciplines, such as psychology, criminology and epidemiology. The essence of the life course approach is a focus on temporal aspects of human lives. This temporal perspective can be used to understand human development from birth to old age as it unfolds in their social and institutional contexts and how individual agency and social institutions structure this development. It also targets attention to timing of life events both as an outcome of interest and to the importance of timing as a moderator of these events on later outcomes.

This seminar covers both foundational ideas and contemporary themes in life course research. Next to covering substantive themes, key focus is on analytical approaches in contemporary life course research, including both conceptual analysis and methodological questions.

The seminar meetings consist of a brief presentation by the teacher on some key questions and theoretical and/or methodological problems of each topic and a classroom discussion between the seminar participants.

Participants are expected to do the assigned readings for each meeting. There are both core readings and additional readings. Of the latter, you should select one or two (as indicated for each week) and be prepared to explain the core points of the paper and how it links to the main topic of the week. Each participant will also lead the discussion for at least one seminar meeting; you are more than welcome to discuss your own research questions in this regard if it fits the session's theme.

Learning objectives

By the end of the seminar, the participants should

- Be familiar with key concepts in life course research
- Understand different temporal dimensions of life courses and change
- Distinguish central analytical approaches to the life course and understand their relationship with one another
- Be able to design a life course study and contribute to key debates in the literature

Key readings (available as ebooks in the library)

Mortimer, Jeylan T., & Shanahan, Michael J. (eds.). 2003. *Handbook of the Life Course*. Springer. => *HANDBOOK I*

Shanahan, Michael J., Mortimer, Jeylan T., & Kirkpatrick Johnson, Monica (eds.). 2016. *Handbook of the Life Course, Volume II*. Springer. => *HANDBOOK II*

PART I BUILDING BLOCKS

1 Introduction: structure and variation in the life course

Tuesday 10 January, 11-13

Life course research is the study of individual change over time and how it is structured and regulated. These questions have been addressed in sociology but also in psychology as well as gerontology, criminology, economics and the evolutionary sciences. This introductory seminar takes a first look at the questions asked.

Core readings

Elder, G. H., et al. The Emergence and Development of Life Course Theory. Ch 1 in *Handbook I*

Kohli, M. 2007. The institutionalization of the life course: Looking back to look ahead. *Research in Human Development* 4(3-4): 253-271.

Diewald, M. & Mayer, K.U. 2009. Sociology of the life course and life span psychology: Integrated paradigm or complementing pathways? *Advances in Life Course Research* 14: 5-14.

Additional readings

Alwin, D. F. 2012. Integrating varieties of life course concepts. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 67(2): 206-20.

Bernardi, L., Huinink, J., & Settersten, R. 2019. The life course cube: A tool for studying lives. *Advances in Life Course Research* 41: 100258.

Sear, R. 2020. Do human “life history strategies” exist? *Evolution and Human Behavior* 41(6): 513-26.

2 Age and age structuring

Tuesday 17 January, 11-13

Age is a fundamental, though often underappreciated, dimension according to which human lives and societies are structured. Increased life expectancy and compression of deaths to old ages mean that there is more life to live and that the length of expected life has become more predictable. Age norms define when certain behaviours are appropriate and expected and

some of these norms are codified into law and institutional practices. Age is both a marker of underlying biological processes and subjectively experienced, and the same chronological age may mean different things to different individuals, both biologically and subjectively.

Core readings

Settersten, R.A. Age structuring and the rhythm of the life course. Ch 4 in *Handbook I*.

Vaupel, J.W. 2010. The biodemography of human aging. *Nature* 464: 536-42.

Rubin, D.C. & Berntsen, D. 2006. People over forty feel 20% younger than their age: Subjective age across the lifespan. *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review* 13: 776-80.

Additional readings (pick one)

Billari, F. C., et al. 2011. Social age deadlines for the childbearing of women and men. *Human Reproduction*, 26(3): 616-622.

DeLisi, M. 2015. Age-crime curve and criminal career patterns. Pp. 51-63 in Morizot, J. & Kazemian, L. (eds.) *The Development of Criminal and Antisocial Behavior*. Springer.

Forde, A. et al. 2019. The weathering hypothesis as an explanation for racial disparities in health: A systematic review. *Annals of Epidemiology* 33: 1-18.e3.

Lechler, M., & Sunde, U. 2020. Aging, proximity to death and religiosity. *Population and Development Review* 46(4): 735-755.

Wilmoth, J. R., & Horiuchi, S. (1999). Rectangularization revisited: Variability of age at death within human populations. *Demography* 36 (4): 475-95.

PART II APPROACHES TO LIFE COURSE ANALYSIS

The second part of the seminar discusses analytical (both conceptual and methodological) approaches to life course research. The six sessions discuss concepts and hypotheses central to life course research and crucially, focus on how these hang together so there will be cross-fertilization in the readings across the sessions.

3 Transitions and trajectories

Thursday 26 January, 15-17 (Teatro)

Life course researchers typically conceptualize and analyze life courses as constituted of sequences or trajectories of social roles and outcomes, which themselves are constituted by transitions between them. Consequently, outcomes observed at a specific time point have a history and inequalities observed at this point in time can be analyzed as inequalities in the transitions that lead to this outcome. These transitions and the resulting trajectories are shaped by social structures and institutions.

Core readings

Pallas, A. M. 2003. Educational transitions, trajectories, and pathways. Ch. 8 in *Handbook I*

Sampson, R.J. & Laub, J.H. 1992. Crime and deviance over the life course. *Annual Review of Sociology* 18: 63-84.

Additional readings (pick one)

Bearman, P. & Stovel, K. 2000. Becoming a Nazi: A model for narrative networks. *Poetics* 27: 69-90.

Billari, F.C. & Liefbroer, A. 2010. Towards a new pattern of transition to adulthood? *Advances in Life Course Research* 15(2-3): 59-75.

Härkönen, J. & Sirniö, O. 2020. Educational transitions and educational inequality: A multiple pathways sequential logit model analysis of Finnish birth cohorts 1960-1985. *European Sociological Review* 36(5): 700-719.

Mare, R. D. (1981). Change and stability in educational stratification. *American Sociological Review*, 46(1), 72-87.

4 Turning points

Tuesday 14 February, 11-13

Life course trajectories—in education, occupational careers, crime or substance abuse—have persistency. Life course turning points have the potential to break this persistency and shift lives from one trajectory to another. What are turning points, how should they be conceptualized and analyzed empirically?

Core readings

Abbott, Andrew. 1997. On the concept of turning point. *Comparative Social Research* 16:85–106.

Nguyen, H., & Loughran, T.A. 2018. On the measurement and identification of turning points in criminology. *Annual Review of Criminology*, 1:335-58.

Additional readings (pick one)

Bol, T., de Vaan, M. & Van de Rijdt, A. 2018. The “Matthew effect” in science funding. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115(19): 4887-90.

Hogendoorn, B., Leopold, T. & Bol, T. 2020. Divorce and diverging poverty rates: A risk-and-vulnerability approach. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 82(3): 1089-1109.

Skardhamar, T. & Savolainen, J. 2014. Changes in criminal offending around the time of job entry: A study of employment and desistance. *Criminology* 52(2): 263-91.

5 Holistic models of the life course

Tuesday 31 January, 11-13

Many life course researchers analyse life courses holistically, where the stages and transitions that constitute it are not considered separately but rather as “packages”. A holistic view on the life course also brings forward questions of the temporality of agency, where decisions are made with anticipation of their potential consequences.

Core readings

Billari, F. C. 2005. Life course analysis: two (complementary) cultures? Some reflections with examples from the analysis of the transition to adulthood. *Advances in Life Course Research* 10: 261-81.

Macmillan, R. 2005. The structure of the life course: Classic issues and current controversies. *Advances in Life Course Research* 9: 3-24.

Additional readings (pick one):

Brückner, H. & Mayer, K.U. 2005. De-standardization of the life course: What it might mean? And if it means anything, whether it actually took place? *Advances in Life Course Research* 9: 27-53,

Brzinsky-Fay, C. 2007. Lost in transition? Labour market entry sequences of school-leavers in Europe. *European Sociological Review* 23(4): 409-22.

Manzoni, A., Härkönen, J. & Mayer, K.U. 2014. Moving on? A growth curve analysis of occupational attainment and occupational careers in West Germany. *Social Forces*, 92(4), 1285-1312.

Van Winkle, Z. 2018. Family trajectories across time and space: Increasing complexity in family life courses in Europe? *Demography* 55 (1): 135-64.

5 Subjectivity and the life course: agency and lived experience

Tuesday 7 February, 11-13

Life courses are not just lived through transitions across statuses and life stages, but also lived as personal experience. Likewise, the literature discussed so far has focused on how external factors shape the life course, but without paying much attention to human agency—beyond treating it as an endogeneity nuisance. How can agency and subjectivity be conceptualized and properly incorporated to life course research?

Core readings

Bertaux, D. & Kohli, M. 1984. The life story approach: A continental view. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 10, 215-37.

Hitlin, S. & Johnson, M. K. 2015. Reconceptualizing agency within the life course: The power of looking ahead. *American Journal of Sociology* 120(5):

Additional readings (pick one)

Cameron, S.V. & Heckman, J.J. 1998. Life cycle schooling and dynamic selection bias: Models and evidence for five cohorts of American males. *Journal of Political Economy* 106(2): 262-333.

Barrett, A.E. & Barbee, H. 2022. The subjective life course framework: Integrating life course sociology with gerontological perspectives on subjective aging. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 51, 100248.

Shütze, F. 2005 [1984]. Cognitive figures of autobiographical extempore narration. Pp. 289-338 in Miller, R. (ed.) *Biographical Research Methods, Volume II*. Sage.

Landes, S. D., & Settersten, R. A. 2019. The inseparability of human agency and linked lives. *Advances in Life Course Research* 42: 100306.

7 Critical and sensitive periods

Tuesday 21 February, 11-13

Life course experiences such as unemployment, separation, and illness can have long-lasting consequences. Does experiencing these at some ages or life stages have stronger effects than at others? These questions have been considered not only by social scientists but crucially by epidemiologists as well.

Core reading

Ben-Shlomo, Y., Mishra, G., & Kuh, D. 2014. Life Course Epidemiology. Pp. 1521-49 in Ahrens, W. & Pigeot, I. (eds.) *Handbook of Epidemiology*, 2nd Edition.

Additional readings (pick two)

Heckman, J. J. 2007. The economics, technology and neuroscience of human capability formation. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104(33): 13250-55.

Wodtke, G.T., Harding, D.J., & Elwert, F. 2016. Neighborhood effect heterogeneity by income level and developmental period. *American Journal of Sociology*, 121(4): 1168-1222.

Almond, D. & Currie, J. 2011. Killing me softly: The fetal origins hypothesis. *Journal of Economic Literature* 25(3): 153-72.

Kiley, K. & Vaisey, S. 2020. Measuring stability and change in personal culture using panel data. *American Sociological Review* 85(3): 477-506.

Kalil, A., Dunca, G.J. & Ziol-Guest, K.M. 2016. Early childhood poverty: Short and long-run consequences over the lifespan. Pp. 341-54 in *Handbook II*

8 Cumulative (dis)advantage

Tuesday 28 February, 11-13

For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. — Matthew 25:29. Cumulative (dis)advantage processes accumulate resources and benefits to the same individuals. How are can these processes be conceptualized and studied? Focus will be on thinking about the “weak” vs “strong” versions of cumulative (dis)advantage, that is, distinguishing between “mere” accumulation and self-reinforcing processes of (dis)advantage.

Core readings

DiPrete, T. A. & Eirich, G. M. 2006. Cumulative advantage as a mechanism for inequality: A review of theoretical and empirical development. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 32: 271-97.

Ferraro, K. F., & Schippee, T. P. 2009. Aging and cumulative inequality: How does inequality get under the skin? *The Gerontologist*, 49(3): 333-43.

Additional readings (pick one)

Aradhya, S., Grotti, R. & Härkönen, J. 2023. Unemployment persistence among second-generation immigrants. *European Sociological Review* <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcac071>

Biljsma, M. J., Wilson, B., Tarkiainen, L., Myrskylä, M., & Martikainen, P. 2019. The impact of unemployment on antidepressant purchasing: Adjusting for unobserved time-constant confounding in the g-formula. *Epidemiology*, 30(3), 388-95.

Mishra, G. et al. 2009. A structured approach to modelling the effects of binary exposure variables over the life course. *International Journal of Epidemiology* 39:528-37.

Willson, A.E., Shuey, K.M. & Elder, G.H., Jr. 2007. Cumulative advantage processes as mechanisms of inequality in life course health. *American Journal of Sociology* 112(6): 1886-1924.

PART III LIFE COURSES IN CONTEXT

9 Lives in context: Linked lives and institutional regulation

Tuesday 7 March, 11-13

The above approaches to life courses were centered on individual-level processes and development. These are shaped by the social contexts, both at the meso-level and the macro-level. Meso-level processes refer typically to life course embeddedness in social networks (also referred to as “linked lives”) and macro-level processes refer to structuration by the broader institutional framework of the society.

Core readings

Bernardi, Laura, Huinink, Johannes, & Settersten, Richard A. 2019. The life course cube: A tool for studying lives. *Advances in Life Course Research* 41: 100258.

Mayer, K. U. 2005. Life Courses and Life Chances in a Comparative Perspective. In S. Svallfors (Ed.), *Analyzing Inequality: Life Chances and Social Mobility in Comparative Perspective* (pp. 17-55). Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Additional readings (pick one)

Putney, N.M. & Bengtson, V.L. Intergenerational relations in changing times. Ch 7 in *Handbook I*

McManus, P.A. & DiPrete, T.A. 2000. Family change, employment transitions, and the welfare state: Household income dynamics in the United States and Germany. *American Sociological Review* 65(3): 343-70.

Sear, R., & Mace, R. 2008. Who keeps children alive? A review of the effects of kin on child survival. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 29, 1-18.

10 Living through history: age, period and cohort in life course research

Tuesday 14 March, 11-13

Individuals age through historical time, and two individuals born at different times cannot live through the same ages in different periods. Life course scholars' interest in different temporal dimensions (at individual and societal levels) and the different temporal effects discussed above have led to a long discussion on what age, period and cohort effects mean and can be distinguished empirically from one another.

Core readings

Elder, G.H. & George, L.K. Age, cohorts, and the life course. Pp. 59-86 in *Handbook II*.

Luo, L. & Hodges, J. S. 2022. The age-period-cohort-interaction model for describing and investigating inter-cohort deviations and intra-cohort life-course dynamics. *Sociological Methods and Research*, 51(3): 1164-1210.

Additional readings (pick one)

Barclay, K. & Myrskylä, M. (2016). Advanced maternal age and offspring outcomes: Reproductive aging and counterbalancing period trends. *Population and Development Review*, 42(1), 69-94.

Elder, G.H. 1974. *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience*. Westview Press.

Mannheim, K. 1952 [1928]. The problem of generations. Pp. 276-322 in *Essays on the sociology of knowledge*, edited by P. Kecskemeti. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Neil, R. & Sampson, R.J. 2021. The Birth lottery of history: Arrest over the life course of multiple cohorts coming of age, 1995-2018. *American Journal of Sociology* 126(5): 1127-78.