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Author(s): Glen H. Elder, Jr.

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The Life Course as Developmental Theory

Glen H. Elder, Jr.

The pioneering longitudinal studies of child development (all launched in the 1920s and 1930s) were extended well beyond childhood. Indeed, they eventually followed their young study members up to the middle years and later life. In doing so, they generated issues that could not be addressed satisfactorily by available theories. These include the recognition that individual lives are influenced by their ever-changing historical context, that the study of human lives calls for new ways of thinking about their pattern and dynamic, and that concepts of human development should apply to processes across the life span. Life course theory has evolved since the 1960s through programmatic efforts to address such issues.

INTRODUCTION

A central premise ties together the studies presented in this article: *the notion that changing lives alter developmental trajectories*. I address the developmental relevance of these social pathways in the life course, beginning with findings based on *Children of the Great Depression* (Elder, 1974) and their theoretical meaning for life course study and developmentalists in general. Next I turn to the challenges we have pursued over recent decades and the responses that have fostered advances in life course theory. I conclude with some developmental implications of successive life transitions, from the early years to later life.

Empirical Origins

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, three pioneering longitudinal studies of children were launched at the University of California, Berkeley: the Oakland Growth Study (birth years 1920–1921), under the direction of the late Harold and Mary Jones; the Berkeley Guidance Study (birth years 1928–1929), directed by the late Jean Macfarlane; and the Berkeley Growth Study (also 1928–1929), managed by the late Nancy Bayley. No one could have imagined at the time what this collective effort would mean for an emerging field of child development. From their Berkeley Institute of Child Welfare (now called Human Development), the investigators saw few other projects engaged in studying children over time. The modest beginning established by these studies represents a key event in the remarkable growth of longitudinal research, centered on human development across the life course.¹

1. An account of the three longitudinal studies at the Institute of Human Development can be found in volumes edited by Eichorn, Clausen, Haan, Honzik, and Mussen (1981) and by

I first encountered these studies in the early 1960s after arriving at the institute (now called Human Development) to work with John Clausen on a study of careers using data from the Oakland Growth Study. The archival records from year to year broadened my vision of lives and revealed the dramatic instability of families under changing economic conditions, the Great Depression. A good many study members could say that they were once “well off” and then “quite poor.” Life histories noted frequent changes of residence and jobs, such as they were. A child in an economically deprived family who seemed “old beyond his time” recovered his youthful spirit when family income improved. Overall, the Depression children who did well in their adult years left many puzzles behind.

Such events focused my attention on ways of thinking about social change, life pathways, and individual development as modes of behavioral continuity and change. These pathways represent the most distinctive area for exploration. In my view, they refer to the social trajectories of education, work, and family that are followed by individuals and groups through society. Life transitions (e.g., entry into first grade, birth of a child) are always part of social trajectories that give them distinctive meaning and form

Jones, Bayley, Macfarlane, and Honzik (1971). One of the most important studies based on the Oakland Growth and Guidance samples following participants into adulthood was produced by Jack Block (with the assistance of Norma Haan), entitled *Lives through Time* (1971). Other major studies include Clausen's *American Lives* (1993) and Elder's *Children of the Great Depression* (1974). The growth of longitudinal studies has been documented in a number of volumes, including Cairns, Elder, and Costello (1996), Elder (1985), Magnusson and Bergman (1990), Nesselrode and Baltes (1979), and Rutter (1988).

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(Elder, 1998). The multiple trajectories of individuals and their developmental implications are basic elements of the "life course," as conceptualized in research and theory.

Historical forces shape the social trajectories of family, education, and work, and they in turn influence behavior and particular lines of development. Some individuals are able to select the paths they follow, a phenomenon known as human agency, but these choices are not made in a social vacuum. All life choices are contingent on the opportunities and constraints of social structure and culture. These conditions clearly differed for children who grew up during the Great Depression and World War II. Such thinking prompted the way I studied children of the Great Depression, based on the Berkeley Institute studies. It also influenced how I proceeded to carry out a series of investigations of human life and development in different times and places—World War II and the Korean War, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, rural disadvantage in contemporary America, and inner-city poverty.

The Oakland and Berkeley cohorts were subject to the influence of other historical times, including World War II and the Korean conflict. The Oakland males were old enough to serve in World War II, whereas the younger Berkeley males typically experienced this war in terms of mobilized life on the homefront. They served mainly in the Korean War. Later in this article I draw upon accounts of such experiences, as reported in a series of papers (Elder, 1986, 1987; with Clipp [Elder & Clipp, 1988, 1989; see also Clipp & Elder, 1996]). The talented men and women in Lewis Terman's sample (born between 1903 and the 1920s) also encountered the Great Depression and World War II, but later in life (Holahan & Sears, 1995). Our studies show that this later timetable made a lasting imprint on their lives (Elder, Pavalko, & Hastings, 1991), a point well documented by the impact of World War II.

Another effort to examine the role of the state in social mobilization took us to Shanghai and a life history study of the Cultural Revolution in the lives of men and women just prior to the crisis of Tianamen Square (Elder, Wu, & Yuan, 1993). In collaboration with the Institute of Sociology (Shanghai University) and the Carolina Population Center, we used retrospective life history methods in a survey of 1,300 adults in Shanghai during the winter and spring of 1987–1988. Especially among urban young people who were sent to peasant communities and mines, the disruptive forces and sanctions of the Cultural Revolution led to the postponement of family formation and to the loss of education and conventional

career prospects. Because prospective longitudinal studies are not available on the near or distant past in developing societies, this study proved unusually valuable in showing us the effectiveness of retrospective life history techniques for recovering knowledge about the enduring effects of past events.

In the 1980s, hard times returned to rural America with a collapse of land values reminiscent of the Great Depression's jolt. This event led to collaboration with Rand Conger and colleagues at Iowa State University on a panel study of economic stress in family relationships and children's life experiences (Conger & Elder, 1994; Elder, 1992). A third of the families in this north central region of Iowa were engaged in farming, and a fifth had no exposure to agriculture, either in childhood or in their adult years. Launched in 1989, this study of 451 families drew upon analytic models in studies of "children of the Great Depression" and also extended them in fruitful ways through better documentation of the "linking" or intervening experiences and processes.

As in the Depression research, we viewed the family and its adaptations as a central link between a generalized economic decline and the well-being of children. Indebtedness, income loss, and unstable work increased the felt economic pressure of families. The stronger this reported pressure, the greater the risk of depressed feelings and marital negativity among parents. These processes tended to undermine nurturant parenting and increased the likelihood of emotional distress, academic trouble, and problem behavior among boys and girls. Countering such cumulative adversities are resourceful paths to adulthood, most commonly associated with families that have ties to the land (Elder & Conger, in press). The Iowa Youth and Families Project is currently following these children into their adult years of advanced education, family formation, and work.

At the same time, inner-city poverty became an important issue, as the rate of poverty climbed steadily higher in the neighborhoods of our large northern cities (Jargowsky, 1997; Wilson, 1987). To understand the implications of this change for minority children in particular, I joined a research team that was beginning to focus on families and young adolescents in the central city of Philadelphia. In neighborhoods that range from a poverty rate of 10% to 40%, we investigated pathways of success and trouble among African American and European American youth ($N = 487$, ages 11–14 in 1991—Elder, Eccles, Ardel, & Lord, 1995; Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, in press). As in the Iowa study, we identified a similar process by which economic hardship adversely influenced Black and White children.

Family resources and strategies proved to be more potent in fostering successful outcomes in youth (in academic achievement, social involvement, emotional health, avoidance of problem behavior) than neighborhood influences. There were greater differences within particular neighborhoods, among families and children, than between them. In high-risk neighborhoods, we asked how parents sought to minimize children's exposure to dangers (e.g., keeping children in the house) and maximize opportunities beyond the household (e.g., involving children in recreational and education programs in the area). This project is part of a research program sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Adolescent Development among Youth in High-Risk Settings.

Children of the Great Depression: Some Theoretical Implications

Longitudinal data at the University of California's Institute of Human Development at Berkeley contributed to these research themes and approaches by encouraging me to think holistically about lives and development over time and across changing contexts. I had to move beyond the early longitudinal projects that were known for child-based studies in single domains, such as problem behavior in the work of Jean Macfarlane (Macfarlane, Allen, & Honzik, 1954) on the Berkeley Guidance sample.

This also applied to the Oakland Growth Study (1930–1931) established by Harold Jones and Herbert Stolz. They were interested in normal growth and development, including physical maturation. Neither developmental nor health effects of the encompassing Depression crisis were on their agenda. Over 30 years later, I was privileged to use the data archive they had constructed and saw the possibility of bringing these larger contextual forces to an understanding of the lives of the Oakland men and women, then in their forties. I asked how the economic depression of the 1930s affected them as children with a background in middle- and working-class families before the economic collapse.

Members of the Oakland Study were born at the beginning of the 1920s, entered childhood during this prosperous decade, and then encountered the economic collapse as adolescents through the hardship experience of parents and relatives. Their historical location placed them at risk of this deprivational event. Some were exposed to severe hardships through the family, whereas others managed to avoid them altogether. These contrasting situations, deprived and nondeprived, established an "experi-

ment in nature" with empirical findings that affirm the principle of (1) *historical time and place*: that the life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime.

The full significance of this principle is clarified by comparing the adolescent experience of the Oakland cohort with that of youth who were born a decade earlier and later. For example, a large number of men and women in Lewis Terman's sample (Holahan & Sears, 1995) of highly able youth were born around 1908–1910. They entered grade school during the First World War, and most experienced the relative prosperity of middle-class life during the 1920s. The Oakland children encountered Depression hardships after a relatively secure phase of early development in the 1920s, and they left home after the worst years of the 1930s for education, work, and family.

This life pattern differed strikingly for children who were born at the end of the 1920s or during the Great Depression. A comparative group, the younger Berkeley Guidance children (born 1928–1929), experienced the vulnerable years of childhood during the worst years of the Great Depression, a period of extraordinary stress and instability (see Figure 1—Elder, 1979, 1981; Elder, Caspi, & Downey, 1986; Elder, Liker, & Cross, 1984). Their adolescence coincided with the "empty households of World War II," when parents worked from sunup to sundown in essential industry. We found that the Berkeley children were more adversely influenced by the economic collapse than were the Oakland adolescents, especially the boys.

Even within their respective cohorts, the Oakland and Berkeley study members experienced differences in the temporal order of life events. Some entered marriage before their twentieth birthday, while others were still unmarried 8 years later. Early marriage tended to produce a cumulation of life disadvantages, from socioeconomic hardship to the loss of education. Early childbearing had similar consequences. Later on in life, children of the study members left home at different times in their parents' lives. Whether relatively early or late, the timing of life transitions has long-term consequences through effects on subsequent transitions. The principle of (2) *timing in lives* states that: *the developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events is contingent on when they occur in a person's life.*

Historical events and individual experience are connected through the family and the "linked" fates of its members. The misfortune of one member is shared through relationships. For example, Depression hardship tended to increase the explosiveness of

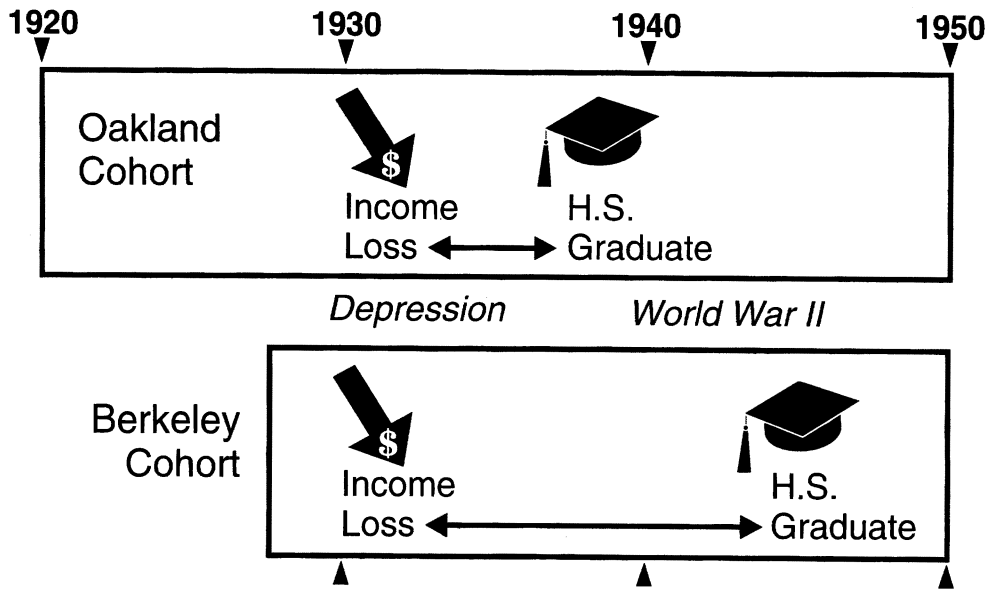


Figure 1 The different historical times of the Oakland and Berkeley cohorts

fathers who were inclined toward irritability. And the more explosive they became under economic stress, the more adversely it affected the quality of marriage and parenting. In these ways, our observations support another principle, that of (3) *linked lives: lives are lived interdependently, and social and historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships*.

The Great Depression brings to mind “a world out of control,” and yet families often worked out successful adaptations in these circumstances. Parents and children made choices and some engaged in effective adaptations within available options and constraints. I have called this human agency. Under the mounting economic pressures of their households, mothers sought and found jobs amidst scarce options, while their children assumed responsibilities in the home and community. When hard-pressed parents moved their residence to cheaper quarters and sought alternative forms of income, they were involved in the process of “building a new life course.” As expressed in this manner, the principle of (4) *human agency* states that *individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances*.

In terms of contemporary knowledge, these early empirical observations already illustrate core principles of life course theory. I use the term “theory” to refer to a framework and orientation (Merton, 1968). Life course theory defines a common field of inquiry by providing a framework that guides research on

matters of problem identification and conceptual development. The key principles are *historical time and place, the timing of lives, linked or interdependent lives, and human agency*. Considerations of historical context and social timing enabled us to see how members of the Oakland and Berkeley cohorts were influenced differentially by their life experiences. Moreover, these influences could only be understood through the hardship adaptations of people who were important in their lives—through the agency and dynamic of linked lives.

As one might expect, the principle of historical time is most fully expressed today in the work of historians within the new social history who have played an important role in the development of life course studies. Especially prominent in this group is Tamara Hareven (1978, 1982, 1996), who has pioneered in the historical study of families and lives. In collaboration with her study of Manchester, NH, men, we show that both historical time *and* place (i.e., region) make a difference in life opportunities and adult careers (Elder & Hareven, 1993). Another important contribution is Modell’s (1989) study of the emergence of the social institutions of adolescence (such as dating, courtship) across twentieth-century America. A productive collaboration between historians and developmentalists is reported in *Children in Time and Place* (Elder, Modell, & Parke, 1993), and includes an insightful account of ways of studying children in history (see Cahan, Mechling, Sutton-Smith, & White, 1993).

The principle of timing has been associated with

the work of Bernice Neugarten on adult development since the 1950s (see Neugarten, 1968; Neugarten & Danon, 1973; and Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985). In the 1960s, sociological studies of age greatly expanded our understanding of the social and individual implications of the temporal pattern of events (see Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972). Planned alterations in the timing of life events is one expression of the principle of human agency. People's choices on timing construct their life course (Clausen, 1993). The primacy of human agency in life course thinking has been strengthened by a number of developments, including Bandura's pioneering research on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and greater knowledge of genetic influences on the selection of environments (Dunn & Plomin, 1990; Scarr & McCartney, 1983). But the chance to make certain choices depends on the opportunities and constraints of history.

The principle of linked lives is a key premise of the earliest social account of *pattern* in human lives (see Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918–1920), and it remains a cornerstone of contemporary life course theory, with its notions of role sequence and synchronization. Today the idea of linked lives is central to the ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and is expressed in models of personal networks (Granovetter, 1973) and in their convoys of friends and family over time (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). Synchronization in life planning and action refers to the coordination of lives, usually on matters of timing (Hareven, 1991). The concept of family management (Furstenberg, 1993; Sampson, 1992) generally concerns the effectiveness of life synchronization among members, along with other adaptations. A full account of these applications in life course theory and its contribution to an understanding of child development is available in Volume 1 of the new *Handbook of Child Psychology* (Elder, 1998; see also 1995, 1996).

When work began on *Children of the Great Depression* in the mid-1960s, a field of life course studies or relevant theories did not exist. The concept of life course was rarely discussed in the scholarly literature or in graduate seminars. In putting together a study of children in the Great Depression, I drew upon the ideas and research of many people in the social and behavioral sciences who were beginning to work on relevant problems, such as aging (see Elder, 1998). Though neglected at the time, these contexts of developmental relevance are now gaining appropriate visibility through multilevel studies of neighborhood and community effects in children's lives (Furstenberg et al., in press; Sampson, 1997). With advances in statistical models, we are now able to investigate

the interplay of changing behavior and personality with changing social pathways. However, it is still the case that longitudinal studies *seldom* examine the stability and nature of children's social environments over time (Sameroff, 1993, p. 8). As a result, sources of behavioral continuity and change remain poorly understood.

The work ahead is daunting, to be sure, but life course ideas on time, process, and context have continued to spread throughout the social and behavioral sciences. We find examples in both ecological and life-span developmental psychology, in the new social and cultural history of family and children, and in cultural models from anthropology and the sociology of age (see Elder, 1996, 1998; Featherman, 1983). I think of this diffusion in terms of research issues that were once posed many years ago by the Berkeley longitudinal studies.

Challenges to Life Course Theory

The Berkeley studies were originally designed for assessments of child development. There was no plan to follow the participants into their twenties and thirties. As they continued into adulthood and even the later years, they acquired greater theoretical significance. I see this significance in the fresh momentum they gave to the study of adult development and its implications for children's lives, along with more awareness of the correlated limitations of child-based models of growth and development.

When the study members reached adulthood, investigators had two ways of thinking about social pathways, and neither placed individuals in history. One involved the notion of careers, usually over a person's worklife. The second is known as the "life cycle"—a sequence of social roles that bear upon stages of parenthood, from the birth of children to their departure from the household and their eventual transition to the role of parent, setting in motion another life cycle.

Neither approach proved satisfactory. The career model dealt with single careers, mainly a person's work life, and thus oversimplified the lives of people who were coping with multiple roles at the same time. The large-scale entry of mothers into the labor force produced circumstances that favored a new concept of multiple, interlocking trajectories that varied in synchronization. Career perspectives also failed to incorporate notions of age-graded expectations in a systematic way and did not orient analyses to the historical context of lives across the generations.

Life cycle theory helped to contextualize people's

lives by emphasizing the social dynamic of “linked lives.” These connections extend across the generations and serve to integrate young and old. Social ties to significant others become forms of social control and constraint in channeling individual decisions and actions. Socialization occurs through such networks of social relationships. Though notable, these contributions of life cycle theory did not locate people according to their life stage or historical context.

To address these limitations, studies began to draw upon the insights of a deeper knowledge of age in people’s lives. The cultural content of child socialization has much to do with the learning of behaviors that are prescribed and proscribed by age. They constitute “age expectations.” These cultural expectations include notions about the timing and order of transitions, such as entry into first grade, and about whether the events are early, on time, or late (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985). Some events are “out of order” according to conventional expectations, such as births before marriage. Ill-timed or off-timed events (too late or too early) can have adverse effects. In addition, birth year orients analysis to people in specific historical locations, and thus according to particular changes. Consider Americans who were born in the late 1930s. They avoided the generalized pressures of family stress and deprivation, but faced another risk—that of the absence and loss of father during the Second World War.

Children of the Great Depression (Elder, 1974) brought the *life cycle model* together with an *age-based concept of timing* in a framework on the life course. Neither perspective was adequate by itself. In the life cycle approach, the notion of “linked lives” enabled us to understand how Depression hardship influenced children through the family. And it proved helpful in thinking about socialization and the role sequences of adult life. But age distinctions were needed to locate families in history and to mark the transitions of adult life. The meanings of age brought a perspective on “timing” to the study.

A more recent study also shows the insights of a life course model that incorporates ideas of career, life cycle, and age, as expressed in the core principles of timing and linked lives. Among African American families in Los Angeles, Burton (1985; see also Burton & Bengtson, 1985) found that the timing of a young daughter’s birth had repercussions well into the grandparent generation. A birth in early adolescence multiplied strains and deprivations, reflecting the violation of deep-seated expectations about “how life should be lived.” The young mothers expected their own mothers to help care for their child, but this expectation seldom materialized because they felt

“too young” for the grandmother role. As a mother put it, “I can’t be a young momma and a grandmomma at the same time.”

In this study, the birth of a child defines a life transition, but transitions are frequently a succession of choice points (see Figure 2). In fact, the transition to motherhood in adolescence can be thought of as a *multiphasic process* in which each phase is linked to a choice point. Young girls may choose to engage in premarital sex or not, or to use contraception or not, to seek an abortion or not, and to marry the father or not. Only a handful of options lead to a birth out of wedlock. Not too long ago, unwed motherhood was viewed simply as *one* transition, a concept that obscured appropriate points of preventive intervention along the life course.

What are the consequences of a childbirth that occurs much too early according to expectations? One life course interpretation stresses the *cumulation of disadvantages*—a concatenation of negative events and influences. Birth of a child to an early adolescent may result in the early termination of schooling, with its negative implications for employment. Whether disadvantages cumulate or not depends on the new mother’s response to her circumstance. In a Baltimore longitudinal study of African American generations (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987), young mothers who could stay in school through the childcare provided by their mother or who married the father were able to minimize the long-term disadvantage of an ill-timed birth.

As life course theory advanced, it provided a framework for studies that relate social pathways to history and developmental trajectories. In any longitudinal study, the mere step of locating parents in history through their birth year can generate historical insights that would not be achieved otherwise. Consider what we have learned about Lewis Terman’s sample of gifted Californians who were born between 1900 and the 1920s (Holahan & Sears, 1995). Selected as the upper 1% of age peers at 19, these “best and brightest” seemed to be invulnerable to the misfortunes of history. However, the twentieth century proved to be no respecter of their high ability (Shanahan, Elder, & Miech, 1997). Men born before 1911 ended up with college degrees and no place to go in the stagnant economy of the 1930s. Their alternative in many cases was to stay in school, piling up degrees. Indeed, they ended up better educated than the younger men, but aspirations had little to do with their achievement.

Life course theory provides a way to study the myriad changes that bear upon children in today’s world (see Hernandez, 1993). These include (1) the

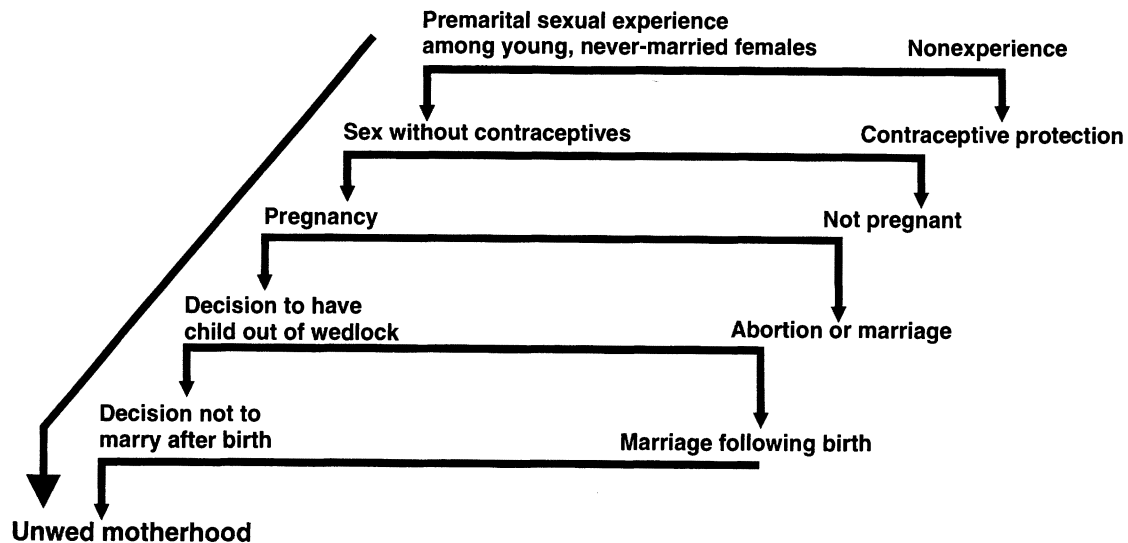


Figure 2 The life course of unwed motherhood

restructuring of the economy through downsizing and other strategies, as expressed through community and family disruption and hardship; (2) the family consequences of expanding levels of economic inequality; (3) the implications of change in the welfare system for children and young families; (4) the concentration of poverty and crime in the inner city; and (5) the redesign of schools and learning through information-age technology. All epochs of social change call for approaches to child development that view children in their changing ecologies. The motivating question focuses on the process by which a particular change is expressed in the way children think, feel, and behave.

More concepts of development are at work today in studies across the life course, and projects are assessing the developmental impact of changing pathways in changing times.² The challenge involves the

2. These challenges to life course theory and analysis—thinking about lives, human development, and their relation to changing times—are a large part of the story, but they should be combined with the task of establishing concepts of development that apply across the life course, a major item on the agenda of developmental life-span psychology (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998). In “The Life Course and Human Development” (Elder, 1998), I discuss the convergence of these strands in contemporary life course theory. Paul Baltes has been most involved over the years in the development of life-span concepts. In his writings, selection, optimization, and compensation mechanisms aim to minimize the impact of organismic losses and maximize gains. Thus, children may select activities in which they are successful, whether sports or music, and optimize benefits through an investment of time, energy, and relationships. In old age, the musician might restrict the number of pieces and practice more often to compensate for declining physical skill.

analysis of “interlocking trajectories” that connect changing environments with behavioral changes. Consider the following: Using growth curve models, a longitudinal study found that increasing negative life events contributed significantly to the widely documented rise in depressed feelings among girls during early adolescence, especially in the absence of parental warmth (Ge, Lorenz, Conger, Elder, & Simons, 1994). No such effect was observed among boys. In another research example that parallels *Children of the Great Depression* (1974), a nationwide longitudinal study found that mounting economic hardship in families significantly increased the antisocial tendencies and depressed feelings of boys and girls (McLeod & Shanahan, 1996). This type of work provides merely a sampling of the new life course studies.

Transition experiences represent a strategic approach to the possibilities of studying *lives in motion*. Transitions make up life trajectories, and they provide clues to developmental change. The process by which this occurs is captured by the lasting effect of early transitions, my concluding topic.

Transition Experiences in Changing Lives

Early transitions can have enduring consequences by affecting subsequent transitions, even after many years and decades have passed. They do so, in part, through behavioral consequences that set in motion “cumulating advantages and disadvantages.” Individual differences are minimized in life transitions when the new circumstances resemble a “total insti-

tion" that presses from all angles toward a particular behavior (Caspi & Moffitt, 1993, pp. 265–266). One transition with such impact is military service, a common event for young men in the Oakland and Berkeley studies.

Nine out of 10 males from the Oakland Growth Study served in the military, as did over 70% of the Berkeley Guidance males, most of whom came from economically deprived households in the 1930s (Elder, 1986, 1987). Veterans who entered the service immediately after high school fared better in psychological health and life achievement than nonveterans, regardless of preservice background. This "early entry" occurred before adult careers and thus became a formative influence. In large part, military service accounts for why many "children of the Great Depression" did well in their lives. Three functions of the service offer essential details of this developmental process.

First, military mobilization tends to pull young people from their past, however privileged or deprived, and in doing so creates new beginnings that favor developmental change. This transition, as a Berkeley veteran noted, provided a "passage into manliness."

Second, military service establishes a clear-cut break from the age-graded career, a time-out in which to sort matters and make a new beginning. For another Berkeley veteran, the army "was a place to be for a while, a place for sorting out self."

Third, military service offers a wide range of new experiences for personal growth from group processes, training, and travel. Almost overnight, young men were placed in demanding leadership roles. The G.I. Bill for advanced education was also part of this developmental regime.

Experiences of this kind do not exhaust all features of military service, but they collectively shaped a "developmental turning point" for youth from disadvantaged circumstances. One pathway involved situational changes that made early entrants more ambitious, assertive, and self-directed by mid-life (Elder, 1986). Another pathway led to extensive use of the educational and housing benefits of the G.I. Bill. These trajectories literally changed the kind of parents, husbands, and workers the men became. In this manner, the life change of veterans has special relevance to their children's well-being, a problem explored by Lois Stolz (1954) in the aftermath of World War II.

This research posed important questions regarding the nature of change and continuity in life-span development. Some Guidance Study men experienced dramatic change in their life course, what I de-

scribe as a "turning point." The military placed them in a total institution, and the resulting change established a trajectory of greater competence (Clausen, 1995; Rutter, 1996). In other cases, stress symptoms persisted, especially from war combat (Elder & Clipp, 1989). They may have done so through interactions with others that recreated the "trauma" situation or from the progressive cumulation of behavioral consequences (see Caspi, Bem, & Elder, 1989). Explosiveness born of a war experience may elicit responses that legitimize and reinforce such "disruptive" dispositions.

A more complete account of the change mechanisms is presented by a panel study of approximately 1,000 boys from low-income areas of Boston who grew up in the 1920s and 1930s (Sampson & Laub, 1996; see also 1993). More than 70% served in the military. The matched control design of delinquents and controls was originally used for a longitudinal study of delinquency by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (Glueck & Glueck, 1968), pioneers in research on juvenile delinquency. Men in both samples generally entered World War II at the age of 18 or 19. Most served at least 2 years and overseas.

As expected, the delinquents were more involved in dishonorable discharges and other forms of official misconduct, but they were also more likely to benefit from the service over their life course, when compared to the controls. And this was especially true for men who entered the service early. These men were young enough to take advantage of such experience through in-service schooling, overseas duty, and the G.I. Bill. In particular, benefits of the G.I. Bill were notably greater for veterans with a delinquent past when they entered the service at a young age. All of these experiences enhanced occupational status, job stability, and economic well-being up to the middle years, independent of childhood differences and socioeconomic origins.

As a whole, these findings provide consistent support for an "early timing hypothesis" on the life course advantages of military service. When military service begins shortly after high school, its training, developmental, and resource advantages are most likely to enhance educational opportunities (e.g., the G.I. Bill) and occupational advancement (e.g., officer training). Later entry, by contrast, is more likely to pull men and women out of adult roles, disrupting their life course. Persistent disadvantages appear among veterans who entered the Second World War at a very late age—in their thirties.

Effects of this kind were observed among California men in Lewis Terman's study of highly able children (Elder, Shanahan, & Clipp, 1994). The older co-

hort of men hit both the Depression and war years at "an untimely point" in their lives. They tended to follow a path of life-long disadvantage into the later years, when compared to the younger men (Elder & Chan, in press). They suffered more work instability, earned less income over time, experienced a higher rate of divorce, and were at greater risk of an accelerated decline in physical health by their fifties.

"Timeliness," then, represents an important determinant of enduring military influences from the 1940s and its expression in veterans' lives. The service was indeed a bridge to greater opportunity for many, given appropriate timing.

Reflections

In thinking back to the early 1960s at the Berkeley Institute of Human Development, it would be difficult for any of us to appreciate the research challenge of the longitudinal studies. The institute psychologists were students of child development at a time when the study members were entering their middle years. Child-based models of development had little to offer research accounts of the adult years, their pathways, and turning points.

These were the kinds of issues that I recall in exchanges over case histories at the time. The childhood poverty of some adults in the Oakland Growth Study did not square with their high achievements and good health at mid-life. Jean Macfarlane (1963), director of the Berkeley Guidance Study, also noted in the early 1960s that a number of boys in the Guidance Study turned out to be more stable and productive adults than the staff had expected.

Members of the Oakland Growth and Berkeley Guidance studies are "children of the Great Depression," but the central theme of their lives is not the harsh legacy of a deprived family through enduring limitations. It is not the long arm of a Depression childhood. Rather, it is the story of how so many women and men successfully overcame disadvantage in their lives. Some rose above the limitations of their childhood through military service, others through education and a good job, and still others through the nurturing world of family.

These accomplishments amidst adversity were not gained without personal costs, a point that John Clausen (1993) has made so eloquently in *American Lives*. War stresses continue to reverberate through the lives of some combat veterans, though a good many have "learned to manage" (Elder & Clipp, 1988; Hendin & Haas, 1984). Women on the home-front kept families together while working long hours. Other women survived family abuse and have

coped effectively with the stresses of life. Life success can be assessed partly in these terms. Jean Macfarlane (1963, 1971) may have had this in mind some years ago when she spoke about the maturing experience of working through the pain and confusion of life.

But not even great talent and industry can ensure life success over adversity without opportunities. Talented Black youth in our blighted inner cities face this reality every day. Generations of young Chinese also learned this during the Cultural Revolution when important life decisions were made by the work unit, and many thousands were sent down from the city to the rural countryside and mines. Members of this "sent-down generation" were disadvantaged in education, work careers, mate selection, and family formation (Elder, Wu, & Yuan, 1993). Talented women in the Lewis Terman study discovered this lesson when they were barred from career advancement in their chosen fields (Holahan & Sears, 1995, chap. 5). Even some Terman men found their lives going nowhere as they left college for hard times in the Great Depression and later were mobilized into World War II. The constraining realities of social systems are very real.

Life course theory and research alert us to this real world, a world in which lives are lived and where people work out paths of development as best they can. It tells us how lives are socially organized in biological and historical time, and how the resulting social pattern affects the way we think, feel, and act. All of this has something important to say about our field of inquiry. Human development is embedded in the life course and historical time. Consequently, its proper study challenges us to take all life stages into account through the generations, from infancy to the grandparents of old age.

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ADDRESS AND AFFILIATION

Corresponding author: Glen H. Elder, Jr., Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University Square CB# 8120, 123 West Franklin Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516-3997; e-mail: glen_elder@unc.edu.

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