

LIFE COURSE DYNAMICS

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Summary

The life course became a topic of social science research in the 1960s when traditional life styles and the social structure of industrial society were transformed into individualized life concepts in the context of information technology and service industries. Social change is evident in the restructuring of the life course of women and men in regard to the timing and duration of participating in the institutions of education, family life, work and retirement.

Theories of the life course focus on different levels of analysis and highlight the complex interface of social structure (macro-level), institutions and social networks (meso-level), and biographical actors (micro-level). Age as a social category is used in every society to allocate individuals to configurations of social positions and roles across their life, rights and duties connected with age vary from between periods of history and societies. Periods of the life course in which new roles are acquired are analyzed as dynamic transitions between the institutions and life spheres of society.

Fundamental to the analysis of the life course in modern societies is the way in which the institutions of the welfare state respond to the changing age structure and the extent to which age-norms lose their commitment in favor of more individual biographical decisions in regard to the timing of life transitions.

Psychosocial models are crucial for analyzing the dynamic interplay of agency and structure across life-time, they illuminate the phases of the life course from childhood to death as resulting from the interaction of self-development and changing social contexts. Of special importance for the structure of the modern life course are the

phases of young adulthood and old age, both reflect the expansion and pluralization of social pathways into and out of employment which are characteristic of industrial service societies and their volatile labor markets. Nowadays, adulthood is also a life phase confronted with changing opportunities and increasing risks of discontinuity in all spheres of life. Old age has become an extended life phase of active living in manifold social contexts.

1. Introduction

This contribution presents an overview which proposes that the variability of life course patterns across generations is constituted by differences of institutionally embedded biographical actions. It is argued that in the 21st century, biological age will become less consequential for one's biography than living circumstances, social standards and individual achievements. Most examples in this article refer to Germany because it is a showcase of a successful combination of a social market economy, a traditional welfare state, and the individualization of the life course.

In modern society, the life course is co-produced over time by socioeconomic conditions, welfare provisions, and individual decisions at biographical transitions and in response to life events. In view of the time-related interdependencies of cultural, social and personal dimensions, which characterize the modern life course, its analysis requires a multi-level approach. Life course dynamics can be illuminated by macro-social analyses of governance structures, which regulate social pathways as life paths in the context of changing economic, political and cultural conditions, and micro-social studies of biographies which mirror the accumulation of personal experiences across life phases and outcomes of status passages.

Theories attempt to explain how social structure and individual action are interrelated in time-dependent processes in the context of historical events, institutional regulations, and personal biographies. Social science research studies how population change, e.g. the size of birth cohorts, governance structures, and the interaction of life transitions and careers create modifications of life course patterns.

The life course has become a social institution of its own because it serves as a cultural framework for allocating individuals to social roles and for providing orientation for individual life plans.

Today, age-related milestones, such as job start, marriage, or retirement cannot be passed in time anymore. In the last decades, market transformations have led to extended and diverse social pathways into, during, and out of employment and, thus, to an increased age-variability of careers. The age norms, which tend to mark the main phases of the life course, childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age, are becoming fuzzy.

The micro-dynamics of the life course are best analyzed with a combination of psychosocial and developmental theories which answer to questions concerning individuals' competence to shape their life course as active agents of their biography.

At transitions between life phases and institutions the options of individualized choice

are increasing as well as the risks of failure. There is, for example, growing uncertainty in regard to the timing, duration and outcome of transitions from education to employment and from work to retirement. As comparative research shows, the implications of individualization are not independent of institutional regulations of labor markets, health insurance, and welfare provisions.

Future life course research will study questions about the influence of different cohorts on the restructuring of social conditions and norms and the extent to which society and politics support individuals to come to terms with economic turbulence and the threatened ecosystem.

2. Social Change and the Life Course

Since the second half of the 20th century social, economic, and cultural transformations have been affecting family life, education, and the employment system, as well as social welfare institutions. These historically unique changes also led to an extension of the life expectancy in most capitalist societies in the OECD-world. Hence, the life course became a field of social science theory and research in the 1960s as an attempt to illuminate the extent to which social change has been influencing structure and dynamics of the life course and individual biographies.

The life course is a sequence of phases and transitions from birth to death. In modern societies, with a mix of manufacturing and service industries and welfare institutions, there are five major, more or less distinct life phases: childhood, adolescence and youth, young adulthood, adulthood, old age. There is a linkage between individual experiences and the historical changes occurring on a national and global level. The life cycle, which was structured by biological aging, nature, climate, and cultural “rites of passage” (van Gennep), has been transformed into the life course, structured by psychosocial aging, institutions of the welfare state, and individualized timing of transitions. In modern society, the life course is shaped by cohort membership and opportunities and risks which accompany a person’s movement from birth to death through social time and space. It is not only family conditions that influence this process but also education, the economy, and public policy. Furthermore, the social characteristics of persons, their social origin, citizenship status, and gender create variations in the shape of life courses.

Accordingly, social research is focused on three dimensions of time: historical, institutional, and individual time which direct the view towards long-term consequences of the interaction between social structures, opportunities, and human agency, that is individual goals, decisions, and actions. When analyzing continuity and change of the life course within and between generations, social scientists look at the effects of chronological age, cohort membership, and historical events on the patterns of individual lives across time. In modern societies, for instance, discontinuity of life courses are common, not only resulting from political changes (e.g. erosion of the Soviet Union; fall of the Berlin Wall) and economic crises (e.g. stock markets), and climate catastrophes (hurricanes, tsunamis), but also from individual decisions at transitions and biographical turning points.

Sociology, Developmental and Social Psychology, and Demography provide

fundamental insights, methods and data for understanding the causes and effects of continuity and discontinuity of the life courses of birth cohorts and individuals. Thus, the extent to which the duration of education and the timing of labor market entry, marriage, and retirement differs between generations and societies, can be explained by reference to living circumstances, labor market conditions, population structure, and social policy of the state.

For example, the “baby boomers “, born in the 1950s and ‘60s, are a strong cohort which stayed in the system of education longer and started to work later than earlier cohorts and contributed to the expansion of higher education, created new youth cultures, new music and entertainment markets. When they retire in large numbers around 2020, the baby boomers will strain the welfare state and its pension systems. As a response, the German government, for example, introduced subsidies for private pension schemes, put a ceiling on retirement benefits and extended the retirement age stepwise to age 67. This example shows how the size of a cohort and the interaction between life transitions and the welfare policy of the state create a modification of life course structures.

The chronological version of life course is an invention which parallels the rise of industrial society, when the life cycle from birth to death became more and more regulated by the sequence of education-work-retirement for men and education-family(childrearing and homemaking)-return to employment-empty nest/retirement for women. Thus, it is not just the process of biological aging which constitutes the modern life course, but it is a trajectory which consists of transitions between several life spheres, embedded in the framework of cultural beliefs, social institutions and social networks.

Young adulthood and old age are new life phases which characterize modern societies, where the transition from adolescence through education to employment and family formation has become extended to the late 20s and early 30s, and the post-employment years of retirement last longer and longer (“the greying of society”) because health provisions and new activity patterns promote longevity.

Compared to pre-industrial, economically and technologically less developed societies, in industrial and more pronounced in service and welfare societies, individual achievement has become more important than age norms for the allocation to life stages, a social process that rests on the principle of universal standards of access to life chances. Whereas in pre-industrial societies persons’ social esteem increased with their age and long life experience, modern societies put a premium on individual achievement and flexibility and tend to devalue life experience. For example, in African tribal societies “rites de passage” clearly designated and celebrated transitions from childhood to adulthood by elaborate initiation ceremonies.

Urban industrial societies lack such ceremonies and are characterized by a prolonged youth phase with fuzzy transition ages to adulthood. In rural societies, the principle of seniority, esteem and power of the elderly guarantees the transmission of traditional ways of life and loyalty to the community, based on wisdom and authority. The dominance of the old (men) emphasizes the continuity of an age-driven life course; it

slows down social and economic change because traditional standards are imposed on the young, whose claims for more autonomy and individual biographies are frowned upon. Because there is commitment to the ancestors and the tribal community, an individualized self-concept, which is the prerequisite of a self-directed life course and a flexible timing of biographical decisions, develops only in the context of schooling, urbanization, and the adoption of innovations regarding work and communication media. With increasing levels of education, the young generations will prefer other life styles and peer group activities which reduces the control of the elderly and weakens the social and cultural foundations of seniority.

3. Theories

The life course has become a topic of social science in the 1960s, because of accelerated social change in the wake of economic globalization, deregulation in the employment system, increasing labor market participation of women and mothers, and increasing life expectancy (longevity). In the first decade of the 21st century, life course research has matured to a field of interdisciplinary research par excellence, social anthropology, social and cultural history, sociology, developmental and social psychology, gerontology, and policy science all share the interest in the interplay of personal and social dimensions in the process and outcomes of aging. In this concert sociology occupies a prominent place because of its progress in theory formation, longitudinal methodology, and comparative, cross-cultural studies.

3.1. Levels of Analysis: Macro, Meso, and Micro - Structure, Institutions, and Actors

In view of its complex, time-related interrelationship of social, cultural and personal features, the dynamics of the life course must be analyzed as a multi-level structure: On the macro-level, there are cultural values, economic conditions, and socio-political and welfare structures which define the limits and opportunities of biographical action. On the meso-level, there are institutions, organizations, social networks and local living arrangements that define social spaces for biographical action, e.g. family, peers, colleagues, employers. The micro-level concerns individual experiences, meanings and personal agency: skills, aptitudes, and goals, which define the capacity of adapting to changing contexts through learning and realistic decision making.

The life course concerns the interface of society and the individual because it transfers macro-social conditions and requirements via institutions (meso-level) to guidelines of individual action (micro-level). For instance, economy and politics are connected with individual orientations and activities through the linked institutions of education and job entry: people decide for social pathways which lead from the respective level of education to certain trades and professional careers.

Sociological life course research looks at social structure (macro level) and individual action (micro level) with the focus on historical time (“period”), institutional time (“life chances”), and individual time (“biography”) as crucial dimensions of human existence. Basic features of society are the institutions of socialization and education, employment, and social welfare which organize the life course into three major sections of learning,

working, and retiring. In Europe, the macro-actor the welfare state integrates the life course by offering educational and vocational training pathways, guaranteeing industrial relations and employment standards, and providing a public system of pension insurance. The European Union, for instance, is providing standard application forms for citizens which are based on a “curriculum vitae” called “The European Life Course”. In modern societies, the integration of a life course program is allocated to institutions of education which are transporting the cultural image of the individual which is entitled to shape a developed and just life course.

Demography contributes to life course research on the macro-level by providing statistical models of population growth and decline and of changes in age-related timing of life events, like marriage or retirement.

Social and developmental psychology emphasize the interaction of biological factors and personal characteristics in different social contexts and analyze micro-level processes of self-development across the life time. Both disciplines share the assumption that human development is not a passive process, but an active accomplishment in interaction of persons and their changing social contexts.

Thus, social science offers several theoretical approaches for investigating the life course as a social institution which has three important features: continuity, i.e. a culturally defined and more or less secure trajectory; sequentiality, a series of time-related life events; and biography, a frame of orientation for individual life plans..

An integration of all levels of analysis has been made possible only recently with the advance of longitudinal studies and the collection of life histories in retrospective and prospective research designs.

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Biographical sketch

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