Why are people so fascinated by their high school reunions? Alumni look forward to reuniting with former classmates for the very same reason that life course scholars do research: to find out how people’s lives turned out. Life course and human development scholars seek to discover how and why human lives unfold as they do. Why do some young people succeed in high school, college, and in the workplace while others struggle to earn good grades, find rewarding jobs, and stay out of legal trouble? Why do brothers and sisters from the very same families often follow divergent paths as adults? How do sweeping social changes and historical events—like the Depression era of the 1930s, World War II in the 1940s, the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the stagflation of the 1970s, and the internet explosion in the 2000s—affect the goals, values and opportunities facing each new generation of young people? What factors predict whether old age is marked by physical and cognitive impairment, or vigor and mental acuity?

These are just a few examples of the countless questions that life course scholars investigate—but finding answers requires a more systematic investigation than striding up to a former classmate at a high school reunion and asking “what’s new?” Life course scholars have developed a sophisticated theoretical paradigm to understand human lives. Four key assumptions guide their selection of research questions, and their ways of thinking about human lives: (a) lives are embedded in and shaped by historical context; (b) the meaning and impact of a life transition is contingent on when it occurs; (c) lives are intertwined through social relationships; and (d) individuals construct their own lives through their choices and actions, yet within the constraints of historical and social circumstances.

Life course scholars also rely on rigorous research methods and data sources—including national censuses, sample surveys, in-depth interviews, and historical records—to document human lives. Because a key question of life course research is “how does historical time and place shape lives?” researchers often compare data obtained at different points in time, from different birth cohorts (i.e., individuals born at different points in history), and from different national and cultural contexts. Researchers also rely heavily on longitudinal data, or data obtained from the same person at multiple points in time, so they can track continuity and change within a single life.

ABOUT THE ENCYCLOPEDIA

We created the Encyclopedia of the Life Course and Human Development to introduce life course theory, research, and methods to seasoned social scientists, graduate students,
undergraduate students taking their very first sociology course, and anyone who has ever wondered “what makes people turn out the way they do?” We hope that this volume conveys our enthusiasm for the creativity, breadth, and both theoretical and practical contributions of life course research.

This project was the brainchild of Barbara Rader, an acquisitions editor with Thomson Gale, who retired shortly after setting the wheels in motion for the encyclopedia. Barbara recognized that the core questions of life course sociology and human development are an essential part of most college-level social science courses, yet there existed no single compendium that brought together the latest research and theory on the life course for a broad audience. I agreed that this encyclopedia was an absolute necessity, and happily signed on as editor-in-chief. I promptly invited three esteemed colleagues to serve as the associate editors for each of the three volumes that comprise the encyclopedia: Robert Coonace, University of Texas-Austin (Volume 1, Childhood and Adolescence); Mary Elizabeth Hughes, Johns Hopkins University (Volume 2, Adulthood); and Amy Pienta, University of Michigan (Volume 3, Later Life).

The four-person editorial board then tackled the Herculean task of developing a list of roughly 500 topics to be covered in the encyclopedia. Each board member individually developed their own wish list of topics, and the team then discussed and debated each and every suggestion. Was a topic substantial enough to warrant its own entry? Which classic books were considered sufficiently influential to be included in the annotated bibliography? Which of the hundreds of eminent life course and human development scholars should be celebrated with a biography entry? Should the encyclopedia cover theory and research findings only, or should it also point readers to data sources so that they could conduct their own research? After much deliberation, we narrowed down our list from roughly 1,000 topics to around 450, and invited authors to write the entries. We had two goals in inviting authors. First, we wanted to feature authors who are widely recognized as experts in their field. Second, we wanted to include authors who represented the full range of the professional life course, from outstanding graduate students to eminent emeriti faculty. We are absolutely delighted that such an accomplished group of authors agreed to write for us, and are grateful for the care, creativity, and thoughtfulness that they invested in each and every entry.

Deciding on topics and authors was not the only challenge we faced. The editorial board also thought long and hard about their organizational framework. Should the three volumes reflect separate (yet clearly overlapping and mutually influential) life course stages? Or should it be organized by important life course domains, such as work, family, and health? Or, should there be no organizational framework imposed, and the entries simply run from A to Z? We ultimately decided to divide the encyclopedia into three volumes according to the life course stages that are typically the foci of undergraduate social science courses, such as Adolescent Development, and Sociology of Aging. Yet the debates didn’t stop there. In which volume should we place each entry? Some choices were obvious; nearly all of the 34 entries on education-related issues were assigned to Volume 1 (with the exceptions of “Continuing Education,” “Educational Attainment,” and “Lifelong Learning”). Yet other decisions were less clear-cut. For instance, “Child Custody and Support” describes the impact of custody decisions on children, their adult parents, and their aged grandparents. In the end, we placed entries in the volume that we believed would be the most intuitive “home” for an entry, in the eyes of our readers.

We also questioned whether a topic should be covered in one volume only, or in each of the three. For more than a dozen topics—ranging from parent-child relations to health differentials/disparities to cultural images to genetic influences—we decided that the core research findings, theories and implications were sufficiently distinct for each life course stage as to warrant a unique entry for each volume. Our intellectual deliberations underscore key assumptions of the life course paradigm—life domains are intertwined, the fates of generations are linked, and no single period of life can be understood in isolation from one’s
earlier experiences and future aspirations. As readers peruse the encyclopedia, they will become keenly aware of the fuzziness of boundaries demarcating life course stages and domains. However, to help readers easily locate the topics they’re seeking, we’ve provided a thematic outline that classifies individual entries by broad topical subheading and volume number.

Each of the three volumes follows an A-to-Z format that mixes long “composite” (i.e., multi-part) entries on broad topics like aging, childbearing, health behaviors, mental health, and stages of schooling, and short sidebars on up-to-the-minute and controversial topics like “Bankruptcy,” “Mommy Wars/Images of Motherhood,” “Hurried Child Syndrome,” “Third Age,” and “Virginity Pledges.” Entries range in length from a brief 250 words to more than 7,000 words. Each entry defines key terms, explains why a concept is important for understanding human lives, reviews classic and contemporary works, documents subgroup patterns such as age, race, gender, or cross-national differences, identifies gaps and controversies in research, highlights the implications of life course research for policy and practice, and points to avenues for future study. Most entries are followed by a bibliography, cross-references to related entries, illustrations, and statistical charts and graphs.

Of course, we recognize that we could not cover every possible topic but we hope that the encyclopedia encompasses the topics, theories, scholars, data sources, and research methods that are most central to the study of the life course and human development. We believe that now is the perfect time to unveil this encyclopedia. Ph.D. level social scientists and graduate students have long understood the appeal and importance of adopting a life course approach when studying human lives. In the past decade, nearly a dozen excellent edited volumes and monographs have brought together world-class scholars to synthesize, critique, and extend research and theory on the life course (e.g., Mortimer & Shanahan 2003; Settersten 1999, 2003; Shanahan & Macmillan 2008). For the most part, these sophisticated analyses are targeted toward graduate students and seasoned researchers. However, we know of no other volume that provides a general readership with concise yet cutting-edge statements on nearly 500 topics that represent the range and breadth of life course research.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE LIFE COURSE PARADIGM

Upon their initial foray into studying the life course and human development, students sometimes ask the cynical question, “so, is life course sociology the study of everything?” Researchers working in the life course tradition do study a broad range of topics, ranging from childbearing to criminality, political participation to parenting styles, genetic influences to gender roles. Life course research also incorporates ideas from a broad range of academic disciplines, including biology, economics, epidemiology, genetics, gerontology, history, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, political science, and even statistics. However, scholars working in this tradition approach their work by taking a clear-eyed and highly focused lens on human behavior. The life course paradigm was first articulated by sociologist Glen H. Elder, Jr. (see Elder, 1994 for a review) as an approach to studying human lives that pays equal attention to individual-level biographies and macrosocial influences.

Time is a core component of the life course paradigm, and encompasses both personal time (one’s own age and aging) as well as historical time (historical events and patterns). As such, life course scholars recognize the importance of looking at whole lives in context, rather than isolated stages, such as adolescence (Riley, Johnson, & Foner 1972). The emphasis on whole lives or “life trajectories” has its conceptual and methodological roots in the classic Polish Peasant in Europe and America study, conducted by W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1918–1920). Thomas and Znaniecki studied life histories and also encouraged other researchers to “explore many types of individuals with regard to their experiences in various past periods of life in different situations and follow groups of individuals into the future, getting a continuous record of their experiences as they occur” (Volkart 1951, p. 593). The authors featured in the encyclopedia have heeded this call.
In the following sections, we revisit the four core life course themes mentioned in the opening paragraph of this Introduction, and provide a brief description of the historical roots and contemporary research relevant to each such theme. We hope this brief overview provides readers a foundation for understanding the vast and diverse range of subject matter addressed in this encyclopedia.

**Historical Time and Place**
The life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their life time. Think about how your life is different from the lives of your parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents. The choice of one’s occupation, plans for when (and whether) to marry and have children, the ability to purchase a home, whether one's schooling is interrupted by war or a family’s financial crises, and one's life expectancy are just a few of the many life course experiences that have changed drastically in the past century. The notion that human lives are shaped by social and historical context is a core theme of the life course paradigm, and dates back to the writings of C. Wright Mills. In his classic book *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (1959) proposed that to understand human behavior, scholars must consider both one’s “biography” and “history.” Mills noted that “the sociological imagination enables it possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and external career of a variety of individuals” (Mills 1959, p. 7).

The impact of history on individual lives is most evident during periods of rapid social change (Mannheim, 1928/1952). For example, during the latter half of the 20th century, women’s social roles changed dramatically, as educational and occupational opportunities expanded in the wake of the Women’s Movement. White middle-class women who were stay-at-home mothers in their 1950s witnessed their daughters grow up to have successful careers as lawyers, bankers, doctors, and other careers that historically were considered “men’s” domain. Although mothers and daughters share many similarities, including genetic background, ethnicity, religion, and (often) social class, historical changes created a seismic divide in the life choices made by these two generations of women (Carr, 2004).

The impact of history also operates in very different ways, based on one’s age when a major historical trend unfolds. Young people who were in elementary school when the internet explosion occurred can’t remember life before e-mail, and are technologically-savvy computer whizzes. Older adults, by contrast, often struggled to become comfortable surfing the net, emailing, and text messaging. The effects of specific historical events also vary based on one’s age when the event occurred. Research by Elder and colleagues showed that World War II had vastly different impacts on soldiers, based on their age during the war years. Young entrants had no family or work responsibilities when they shipped off to Japan or Europe, yet older soldiers were abandoning jobs and marriages when they headed overseas. While the young soldiers returned home to new adventures in work, family, and education (due in part to the educational benefits provided by the G.I. Bill), the older soldiers often came home to find their marriages were strained, or their former jobs were no longer available (see MacLean & Elder 2007 for a review). Throughout the encyclopedia, authors highlight the many ways that history shapes individual lives—through processes like economic restructuring and the loss of manufacturing jobs, the 1960s Civil Rights movement that expanded opportunities for ethnic and racial minorities in the United States, and technological and medical advances that enable older adults to live longer and healthier lives than ever before.

**Place**
Place also affects how individual lives unfold. “Place” can be defined as broadly as one’s nation, or as narrowly as one’s neighborhood or city block. Nation-level characteristics, such as the level of economic development or “modernization” can profoundly influence its citizens’ attitudes, values, gender roles, childbearing behavior, educational opportunities and even personality (Inkeles & Levinson, 1969). One’s local social context also matters. Neighborhood characteristics like “social capital” or the social cohesiveness and integration of a city block (Coleman 1990), and “social disorganization” or the level of instability, poverty, and crime in one’s neighborhood (Shaw & McKay 1942) can affect residents’ educational prospects, physical and mental health, occupational opportunities, and even
one’s life span. Place also exposes individuals to potentially life-altering public policies. For example, persons living in nations with restrictive population policies, like China’s one-child policy, have little choice over their childbearing. Encyclopedia entries take special care to highlight the ways that life course trajectories differ across neighborhoods, states, nations, and even continents. Although geography is hardly “destiny” it does play an important role in shaping life trajectories.

Timing in Lives The developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events is contingent on when they occur in a person’s life. How might your life have turned out if you married at age 16? Or if you waited until age 35 to wed? If you married at age 16, you might not have completed high school and might have gone on to have many children, or to hold a poorly paying job that did not require a high school diploma. If you marry for the first time at age 35, you probably have already completed your education, perhaps earning a graduate degree, and having spent many years in the paid work force prior to marrying. Yet marrying at age 35 may mean that one will have only one or two children, given that the likelihood of conceiving a child declines steadily for women after age 35.

These examples illustrate the importance of “social timing.” Social timing refers to the ways that age shapes whether, when, how, and to what end one experiences important social roles and transitions between roles. The timing of life transitions reflects a broad range of biological, social, and political forces. For example, the age at which one can physically bear a child is contingent upon the biological transition to menarche (that is, a girl’s first menstrual period). Social norms also provide guidelines for the “appropriate” time for making transitions. Life course sociologist Bernice Neugarten (1965) has observed that people are expected to comply with a “social clock.” This refers to “age norms and age expectations [that] operate as prods and brakes upon behavior, in some instances hastening behavior and in some instances delaying it” (Neugarten et al. 1965, p. 710).

Neugarten and her colleagues conducted surveys that reveal Americans generally agree that there is a “right” age to marry, start a job, and find one’s own home (Neugarten & Datan 1973). Norms dictating the “right” age for life transitions change over historical time, however. For example, marrying at age 19 and having one’s first child at 20 was normal and even desirable for women, in the late 1950s. By contrast, few college students today (or their parents!) would endorse marrying at such a young age.

Popular culture reinforces the belief that there is a “best” time to make important life transitions. Recent Hollywood films like Failure to Launch and Stepbrothers are an obvious indicator that Americans believe that life transitions that occur “off-time” or later than is typical, are a sign of poor adjustment. Both films depict men in their late 30s who still live with their parents, and who are portrayed as incompetent. Similarly, the 30-something women portrayed in the hit television show Sex & the City bemoaned the fact that they were single, and often were made to feel like failures by their married peers. They also worried that they might not be able to have biological children, if they waited until their 40s to marry. These cultural messages carry another important theme of life course research: “mistimed” transitions—or transitions that occur earlier or later than one’s peers often create psychological stress, difficult challenges, and social disapproval.

Although cultural norms informally prescribe the appropriate timing of life course transitions, public policies mandate the timing of many important transitions. Although state laws vary, the law typically dictates that children must stay in school until age 16, and that young people cannot marry until they are 18 years old unless they obtain parental permission. Likewise, the age that one can vote, drive, drink legally, serve in the military, retire with full Social Security benefits, or become President of the United States is dictated by federal or state law. Laws, like social norms, also change over historical time. While young children labored on farms and in factories in past centuries, child labor was banned in the United States by the Fair Labor Act of 1938, and strict rules now dictate the age at which children can work for pay.
Life course scholars recognize that legal, biological, and social time tables may be out of sync, which may cause difficulties as individuals negotiate their life choices. For instance, boys and girls may be physically able to bear a child at age 13, yet they may not be emotionally prepared to enter the role of parent. Public policies encourage (and in some cases, mandate) workers to retire at age 65, although many older employees are perfectly healthy and willing to remain in the work force for another decade. Married couples may not feel “financially ready” to have a child until both have their careers and finances in place, yet if they delay childbearing too long, it may become biologically unfeasible.

The concept of timing weaves through many entries in this encyclopedia. Entries on important life transitions such as marriage, childbearing, school-to-work transition, home ownership, relocation, widowhood, mortality, and retirement reveal the ways that the timing of such events is shaped by one’s past, yet also sets the foundation for one’s future. Many entries also show that the timing of events varies not only by one’s birth cohort, but by factors such as race, ethnicity, nativity status, and social class. In doing so, the encyclopedia authors reveal the importance of heterogeneity in the life course.

Linked Lives Lives are lived interdependently, and social and historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships. The third theme of the life course paradigm is the notion of “linked lives.” “Linked lives” refers to the way that each individual’s life is embedded in a large network of social relationships—with parents, children, siblings, friends, coworkers, in-laws, romantic partners, and others. The notion that social relationships matter dates back to Émile Durkheim’s (1997 [1897]) classic writings on social integration. Durkheim famously found that persons with tight-knit social networks had lower rates of suicide than those with weaker social ties. Married persons had lower suicide rates than the unmarried, Catholics fared better than Protestants, and parents revealed lower suicide rates than the childless. Since the publication of Durkheim’s work, social scientists have sought to uncover why and how social relationships affect the life course.

Authors in the encyclopedia explore a wide variety of types of social relationships and document patterns such as the impact of parent-child relationships on child outcomes, how peer relationships among school-age persons affect psychological and educational success, and the ways that older persons’ health is protected by spouses, friends, siblings, and significant others. The protective effects of social relationships even extend to studies of crime and deviance over the life course. For example, John Laub and Robert Sampson (2006) found that social relationships, especially marrying, having children, and securing a job, were considered the key pathways out of deviant careers for young men whose early years were spent in reform school.

The concept of linked lives also refers to the ways that generations are linked to one another. A core theme of life course research is intergenerational transmission: parents transmit their values, attitudes, and even their socioeconomic achievements and intellectual resources to their offspring (e.g., Sewell & Hauser 1975; Bauman 1987; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan 1987). Parents socialize their children, and thus teach their children how to become well-adjusted members of society. Although classic studies of socialization revealed the ways that children became like their parents, researchers also have focused on identifying why and how children turn out differently from their parents—often placing emphasis on the many other social relationships and social contexts that a child experiences. For example, James Coleman’s (1961) classic study Adolescent Society shows how high schools students socialize their peers to hold values that are in opposition to the values held by their parents.

Life course sociologists also recognize that life domains are linked. Even within a single individual, work and family choices affect one another; working full-time may preclude one from being a stay-at-home parent, or intensive parenting demands may prevent one from working as many hours as one would like. Likewise, economic standing and physical health are mutually influential; poverty exposes people to health risks such as poor nutrition, yet poor health compromises one’s ability to work full-time. Moreover, life course influences can occur...
both cross-person and cross-domain. A spouse’s work strain may affect one’s own psychological health, while a parent’s job loss (and loss of health insurance) may affect a child’s health.

The classic example of cross-generation, cross-domain linkages is Elder’s (1974) *Children of the Great Depression* study. He found that when fathers lost their job during the Great Depression, mothers and young sons were forced to seek work and earn money, while young daughters often did household chores that would have otherwise fallen to the mother. Thus, the imbalance of power between mother and father weakened the father’s ability to exert control, and shaped the children’s gender role views. The family’s income loss also created marital strain between the parents, and compromised their ability to supervise their children. Elder reveals the cascading consequences of this economic strain across generations and across domains. The complex interplay among generations, social relationships, and life domains is evident in nearly every encyclopedia entry and underscores the key life course theme that lives are embedded in rich networks of roles and relationships.

**Agency**

Individuals construct their own life course through their choices and actions, within the opportunities and constraints of historical and social circumstances. Thus far, we have highlighted the ways that forces external to the individual, like history, birth cohort, wars, and one’s social relationships shape individual biographies. Yet personal agency—or one’s choices, aspirations, ambitions, and attitudes—also shape the life course. Whereas classic sociological research and theory has traditionally emphasized the ways that social structures constrain (or benefit) individuals, the life course paradigm views human behavior as a reflection of both personal agency and structural constraint. Individuals select social roles and opportunities that are consistent with their own personal preferences, traits, resources, and even genetic predispositions (e.g., Scarr & McCartney 1983)—yet freedom of choice is not distributed evenly throughout the population. Persons with fewer economic resources have fewer opportunities to seek out and pursue desirable options, while characteristics such as age, race, gender, physical ability status, sexual orientation and religion may create obstacles for some individuals—at least at certain points in history.

A compelling example of the ways that agency and structure influence life course trajectories can be found in John Clausen’s (1993) book *American Lives*. Clausen tracked a cohort of men and women who were born in the early 20th century, and followed their lives for more than 60 years. He found that an important cluster of traits—“planful competence”—was a powerful predictor of successful careers and marriages, and good health more than five decades after the adolescents had graduated high school. “Planful competence,” according to Clausen, encompasses self-confidence, intellectual investment, and dependability. These attributes, in turn, were associated with better academic performance in school, well-thought out plans for post-secondary schooling, and focus when selecting one’s career. Clearly, planful competence encompasses one’s own ambition, aspirations for the future, and conscientiousness in pursuing one’s goals. At the same time, however, children from more advantaged social and economic backgrounds were more likely than their less well-off peers to enjoy high levels of competence.

Many encyclopedia entries offer compelling descriptions of the ways that psychological traits, like age identity, personality, self-esteem, and even body image, shape one’s future orientations and accomplishments, yet also reflect the resources and relationships one has enjoyed in the past. Psychological factors like agency do not only exert direct effects on life chances, they also may buffer against the negative effects of early adversity, or exacerbate the difficulties that accompany critical life stressors. The interplay between the social and the psychological, micro- and macro-level phenomena, and biography and history, make up the foundation of life course research and scholarship. The entries to follow reveal the vitality and nuance that characterizes this field of study today.

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