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Families in Society; Jan-Mar 2005; 86, 1; Research Library
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The Life Course Perspective: A Promising Approach for Bridging the Micro and Macro Worlds for Social Workers

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ABSTRACT

The life course perspective, an emerging interdisciplinary perspective, has potential for helping social workers bridge their micro and macro worlds. This article provides an overview of the empirical and theoretical roots of the life course perspective and its basic concepts and major themes. Five basic concepts are defined and discussed: cohorts, transitions, trajectories, life events, and turning points. Six major themes that are emerging from interdisciplinary research are examined: interplay of human lives and historical time, timing of lives, linked or interdependent lives, human agency in making choices, diversity in life course trajectories, and developmental risk and protection. Strengths and limitations of the perspective for use by social workers are discussed and connections are made to narrative approaches to practice.

A decade ago, Carel B. Germain (1994) recommended the emerging interdisciplinary life course perspective as a more useful perspective for social workers than traditional life-cycle models of human development. She argued that the life course perspective does a better job of accommodating human diversity than does life-cycle models, which she criticized as assuming "universal, fixed, sequential stages of individual and family development" (p. 259). With further research and theoretical refinement in the past decade, the life course perspective holds promise for bridging the micro and macro worlds of social workers as well (for a more detailed discussion of the life course perspective, see Hutchison, 2003).

The life course perspective, which has been emerging over the past 40 years, locates individual and family development in cultural and historical contexts. It is being created from the independent work, and more recently, the collaborative work, of sociologists, anthropologists, social historians, demographers, and psychologists. Glen Elder, Jr., a sociologist, was one of the early authors of a life course perspective and continues to play a central role in its ongoing development. In the early 1960s, as he examined several decades of data from three pioneering longitudinal studies of children, Elder was impressed with the strong impact of the economic conditions of the Great Depression of the 1930s on individual and family pathways (Elder, 1974). He

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noted the failure of existing theories to consider the important influence of the "ever-changing historical context" (Elder, 1998, p. 1) on developmental pathways, and he called for developmental theory and research that looks at the influence of historical forces on individual and family development.

At about the same time, social history emerged as a serious field in the discipline of history. Social historians were interested in telling the historical story from the point of view of ordinary people rather than from the traditional vantage point of elites. Within the field of social history, Tamara Hareven (1978, 1982, 1996, 2000) has played a key role in developing the subdiscipline of the history of the family. She studies how families change and adapt under changing historical conditions and how family members synchronize their lives as they cope with change.

The life course has been conceptualized from both micro and macro system vantage points. It has been studied from the perspective of the individual as *event history*, or the sequence of events, experiences, and transitions in a person's life from birth to death. It has also been studied from the perspective of the family, in terms of how family lives are synchronized across time. In addition, the life course has been studied as a property of cultures and social institutions that shape the pattern of individual and family lives. Some life course scholars have also conceptualized small groups, communities, formal organizations, and social movements as having life courses marked by both continuity and change (Riley, 1996; Settersten & Mayer, 1997).

Basic Concepts of the Life Course Perspective

Before examining the major themes that have emerged to date from study of the life course, it is important to note a handful of staple concepts associated with the perspective: cohorts, transitions, trajectories, life events, and turning points.

Cohorts

Life course scholars have found the concept of cohort to be very useful in their efforts to capture the influence of the historical context on developmental pathways. A *cohort* is a group of persons who were born at the same historical time and experience particular social changes within a given culture in the same sequence and at the same age (Rosow, 1978; Ryder, 1965; Settersten & Mayer, 1997).

Cohorts differ in size, and these differences affect opportunities for education, work, and family life. Some observers suggest, however, that cohorts develop strategies to cope with the circumstances they face. For example, it is suggested that baby boomers responded to the strong economic competition related to their demographic bubble by delaying or avoiding marriage, postponing childbearing, having fewer children, and increasing the presence of mothers in the labor force (Easterlin, Schaeffer, & Macunovich, 1993).

The configurations of cohorts differ significantly across societies. In most nonindustrialized countries, fertility rates are high, life expectancy is low, and the majority of people are young. In the United States and other Western industrial countries, low fertility and mass longevity result in a high number of older adults and leads to increasing dependence on immigration for a workforce to support the aging population. Migration of legal and illegal immigrants accounted for more than one fourth of the United States' population growth in the 1980s and for about one third of the growth in the 1990s (McFalls, 1998).

The sex ratio, or the number of males per 100 females, also varies across cohorts. Sex ratios affect a cohort's marriage rates, childbearing practices, crime rates, and family stability (McFalls, 1998). For some time, sex ratios at birth have been lower for Blacks than for Whites in the United States, meaning that fewer Black boy babies are born per 100 girl babies than is the case in the White population (see Ulizzi & Zonta, 1994). This disparity holds up across the life course, with a sex ratio of 81 men to 100 women among Black adults over 18 compared with 94 men to 100 women among White adults. When this difference in sex ratios is juxtaposed with a growing disadvantage of Black men in the labor market and their increasing rates of incarceration, it is not surprising that a greater percentage of Black adults (39%) than White adults (21%) had never been married in 1999 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The ratio of men to women declines across adulthood in most countries. In the United States, the sex ratio drops to 40 men for every 100 women in the 85 and older population (McFalls, 1998).

Transitions

The life course perspective proposes that each person experiences a number of transitions in roles and statuses across the life course (George, 1993). Many transitions relate to family life: births, marriages, divorces, remarriages, deaths (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). Each transition changes family status and roles and typically involves exits and entrances of family members. Transitions in small groups, communities, and formal organizations also involve exits and entrances of members as well as changes in status and roles. Like role theory, the life course perspective is interested in the macro issue of structured systems of role behaviors as well as the micro issue of how an individual's behavior and understanding of self are influenced by the roles occupied (see, e.g., Davis, 1996).

Trajectories

The changes involved in transitions are discrete and bounded; when they happen, an old phase of life ends and a new phase begins. In contrast, trajectories involve long-term patterns of stability and change in a person's life and usually involve multiple transitions. Trajectories are not necessarily straight lines, but they do have some continuity of direction. Because individuals and families live their lives in multiple spheres, their lives are made up of multiple, intersecting

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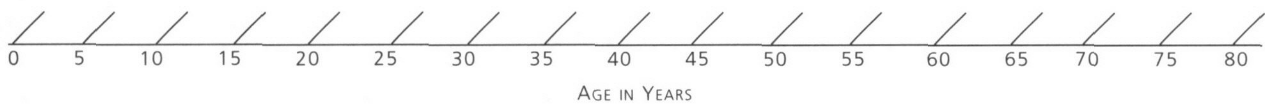
Figure A1. *Lifeline of interlocking trajectories*



Assuming that you will live until at least 80 years of age, chart how you think your life course of interlocking trajectories will look. Write in major events and transitions at the appropriate ages. To get a picture of the interlocking trajectories, write family events and transitions in one color, educational events and transitions in another, occupational events and transitions in another, health events and transitions in another, etc.

trajectories—for example, family life trajectories, educational trajectories, work trajectories, and health trajectories (Cooksey, Menaghan, & Jekielek, 1997; Settersten & Mayer, 1997; Shanahan, Miech, & Elder, 1998). These interlocking trajectories can be presented visually on separate lifeline charts or as a single lifeline (see Figure A1 for instructions for creating a lifeline of interlocking trajectories).

Life Events

A *life event* is a significant occurrence involving a relatively abrupt change that may produce serious and long-lasting effects (Settersten & Mayer, 1997). Life events require adaptation and may produce stress. Some researchers have developed instruments for evaluating the level of stress produced by specific life events, such as the frequently used Schedule of Recent Events, also called the Social Readjustment Scale, developed by Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe (Holmes, 1978; Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Such life events inventories have been criticized by life course scholars on several grounds:

- for failing to distinguish major from minor events, controllable from uncontrollable events, anticipated from unanticipated events, desirable from undesirable events, and acute from chronic events (Settersten & Mayer, 1997, p. 246).
- for their bias toward undesirable, rather than desirable, events, leading to the belief that all life events prompt harmful life changes (Pearlin & Skaff, 1996).
- for their failure to acknowledge that specific life events have different meanings to different people (George, 1996; Hareven, 2000). One example of a study that has taken different meanings into account found that women report more vivid memories of life events in relationships than men report (Ross & Holmberg, 1992).
- for their bias toward events more commonly experienced by certain groups of people: young adults, men, Whites, and the middle class (Settersten & Mayer, 1997, p. 246).

Turning Points

A *turning point* is a special life event that produces a lasting shift, not simply a temporary detour, in the life course trajectory. As significant as they are to individuals' lives, turning points usually become obvious only as time passes (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). Yet in one survey, more than 85% of the respondents reported that there had been turning points in their lives (as cited in Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997).

According to traditional developmental theory, the developmental trajectory is more or less continuous, proceeding steadily from one phase to another. But life course trajectories are seldom so smooth and predictable; they involve many discontinuities, or sudden breaks. Inertia tends to keep us on a particular trajectory, but turning points add twists and turns or even reversals to the life course (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). For example, we expect someone who is addicted to alcohol to continue to organize his or her life around that substance unless some event becomes a turning point for recovery.

Michael Rutter's research (1996) identifies three types of life events that can serve as turning points: (a) life events that either close or open opportunities; (b) life events that make a lasting change on the person's environment; and (c) life events that change a person's self-concept, beliefs, or expectations. Some events, such as migration to a new country, are momentous because they qualify as all three of these types of events. The same type of life event may be a turning point for one individual, family, or other collectivity, but not for another, however (George, 1996). Less dramatic transitions may also become turning points, depending on the individual's assessment of their importance.

Most life course pathways include multiple turning points, some that get life trajectories off track and others that get life trajectories back on track (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). In fact, it could be said that the intent of many social work interventions is to get life course trajectories back on track. Social workers do this when they attempt to precipitate a turning point toward recovery for a client with an addiction. They also do this when they work with a family that is on a path toward emotional divorce. Or they may plan an intervention to help a deteriorating community reclaim its lost "sense of community" and spirit of pride.

Major Themes of the Life Course Perspective

A decade ago, Glen Elder (1994) identified four dominant, and interrelated, themes in the life course approach: interplay of human lives and historical time, timing of lives, linked or interdependent lives, and human agency in making choices. Two other related themes have been identified more recently by Elder (1998) and Michael Shanahan (2000): diversity in life course trajectories and

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developmental risk and protection. Each of these themes is discussed below.

Interplay of Human Lives and Historical Time

Persons born in different years face different historical worlds, with different options and constraints—especially in rapidly changing societies. Consequently, historical time may produce *cohort effects*, which occur when social change affects one cohort differently than it affects other cohorts. For example, Elder's (1974) research on children and the Great Depression found that the life course trajectories of the cohort that were young children at the time of the economic downturn were more seriously affected by family hardship than the cohort that were in middle childhood and late adolescence at the time.

There is much evidence that changes in other social institutions impinge on family and individual life course trajectories (e.g., Cooksey et al., 1997; Elder, 1986; Rindfuss, Swicegood, & Rosenfeld, 1987; Shanahan et al., 1998). Tamara Hareven's (2000) historical analysis of family life documents the lag between social change and the development of public policy to respond to the new circumstances and the needs that arise with social change (see also Riley, 1996). The results of such lags are ubiquitous in the work social workers do. One such lag today is the lag between trends in employment among mothers and public policy regarding childcare during infancy and early childhood. Another is the continued use of employment-based insurance in an era of increasing job mobility and instability.

Timing of Lives

Every society appears to use age as an important variable, and many social institutions in advanced industrial societies are organized, in part, around age—the age for starting school, the age of majority, retirement age, etc. (Settersten & Mayer, 1997). Social scientists have used age as a prominent variable in their efforts to bring order and predictability to our understanding of human behavior. Life course scholars are interested in the age at which specific life events and transitions occur, which they refer to as the *timing of lives*. They may classify entrances and exits from particular statuses and roles as "off-time" or "on-time," based on social norms or shared expectations about the timing of such transitions (George, 1993). For example, childbearing in adolescence is considered off-time in modern industrial societies but on-time in many preindustrial societies. In a similar vein, death in early or middle adulthood, as occurred in great numbers during the early stages of the AIDS epidemic, is considered off-time in modern industrial societies.

But, chronological age itself is not the only factor involved in timing of lives. Age-graded differences in roles and behaviors are the result of biological, psychological, social, and spiritual processes. Thus, age is often considered from each of the perspectives that make up the biopsychosocial framework (e.g., Cavanaugh, 1996; Kimmel, 1990; Settersten & Mayer, 1997). Although life course scholars have not directly addressed the issue of spiritual age, it is an important perspective as well.

Biological age indicates a person's level of biological development and physical health, as measured by the functioning of the various organ systems. It is the present position of the biological person in relation to the potential life cycle. There is no simple, straightforward way to measure biological age, and any method for calculating it has been altered by changes in life expectancy (Shanahan, 2000). Medical research indicates that early social and economic disadvantages as well as chronic stressors in adulthood result in older biological age in relation to chronological age by increasing the rate of chronic disease (Brunner, 1997; Kuh & Ben-Shlomo, 1997). Medical research also demonstrates that safety net programs at critical life course periods, such as infancy and periods of unemployment, illness, and disability, can protect against accumulation of biological risk (Bartley, Blane, & Montgomery, 1997; Olds et al., 1997).

Psychological age can be conceptualized in both behavioral and perceptual terms. Behaviorally, psychological age refers to the capacities that people have and the skills they use to adapt to changing biological and environmental demands, capacities and skills such as memory, learning, intelligence, motivation, and emotions (Settersten & Mayer, 1997). Perceptually, psychological age is based on how old people perceive themselves to be (Barak & Stern, 1986; Henderson, Goldsmith, & Flynn, 1995; Markides & Boldt, 1983). Some anthropologists have found that men and women attach different social meanings to age and use different guidelines for measuring how old they are (e.g., Hagestad, 1991). Culture also plays a role in perceptions of age. Researchers in one study found that a U.S. sample of adults was more likely than a Finnish sample to consider themselves more youthful than their chronological age (Uotinen, 1998).

Social age refers to the age-graded roles and behaviors expected by society, the socially constructed meaning of various ages. *Age norms* indicate the behaviors expected of people of a specific age in a given society at a particular point in time; they specify the expected relationships with family, friends, groups, and organizations (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2002). They may be informal expectations, or they may be encoded as formal rules and laws. For example, on the one hand, cultures have an informal age norm about the appropriate age for becoming a parent. On the other hand, the appropriate age for driving, drinking alcohol, and voting are governed by formal rules in our society. Life course scholars suggest that age norms vary not only across historical time and across societies but also by gender, race, ethnicity, and social class within a given time and society (Chudacoff, 1989; Kertzer, 1989; Settersten & Mayer, 1997). Social age receives special emphasis in the life course perspective. Like earlier developmental theorists, life course scholars recognize life phases, but they see

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them based in large part on social age. They note that the number and nature of these life phases are socially constructed and have changed over time, with modernization and mass longevity leading to finer gradations in life phases and consequently a greater number of them (Settersten & Mayer, 1997).

Life course scholars debate whether the trend is toward greater standardization in age-graded social roles and statuses or toward greater diversification (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998; Shanahan, 2000). Ironically, research indicates that life patterns are becoming, at the same time, more standardized and more diversified. Formal age-structuring appears to become more prevalent as societies modernize (Buchmann, 1989; Meyer, 1986; Settersten & Mayer, 1997; Shanahan, 2000). However, modernization has allowed informal age norms to become more flexibly structured (Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976). Life course research indicates that there is much diversity in the sequencing and timing of adult life course markers such as completing an education, beginning work, leaving home, marrying, and becoming a parent (George, 1993; George & Gold, 1991; Hogan, 1978, 1981; Modell, Furstenberg, & Hershberg, 1976; Settersten, 1998; Shanahan et al., 1998).

Spiritual age indicates the current position of a person in the ongoing search for "meaning and morally fulfilling relationships" (Canda, 1997, p. 302). Although life course scholars have not paid much attention to spiritual age, it has been the subject of study by some developmental psychologists and other social scientists. In an exploration of the meaning of adulthood, edited by Erik Erikson in 1978, several authors explored the markers of adulthood from the viewpoint of a number of spiritual and religious traditions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Several themes emerged across the various traditions: balance between contemplation and moral action, reason, self-discipline, character improvement, loving actions, and close community with others. All the authors noted that spirituality is typically seen as a process of growth, a process with no end. James Fowler (1981) presented a theory of faith development that strongly links it with chronological age. Ken Wilber's (1977, 1995) full-spectrum model of consciousness also proposes an association between age and spiritual development, but Wilber does not suggest that spiritual development is strictly linear. He noted, as did the contributors to the Erikson book, that there can be regressions, temporary leaps, and turning points in a person's spiritual development.

As a framework for social workers, the life course perspective has several advantages over traditional theories of human development.

Linked or Interdependent Lives

The life course perspective emphasizes the interdependence of human lives and the ways in which relationships both support and control an individual's behavior. *Social support*, defined as help rendered by others that benefits an individual (Thoits, 1985), is an obvious element of interdependent lives. But, relationships also control behavior through expectations, rewards, and punishments. The family is seen as the primary source of both support and control. Life course scholars have paid particular attention to how the lives of family members are linked across generations, noting that both opportunity and misfortune have an intergenerational impact. They also have been interested in how families are linked to the wider world.

Links among family members. Certainly, parents' and children's lives are linked. Elder's longitudinal research of children raised during the Great Depression found that parents faced a greater risk of depressed feelings and marital discord when they experienced increased economic pressures. Consequently, their ability to nurture their children was compromised, and their children were more likely to exhibit emotional distress, academic trouble, and problem behavior (Elder, 1974). The connection between family hardship, family nurturance, and child behaviors is now well established (e.g., Conger et al., 1993; Conger, Elder, Lorenz, Simons, & Whitbeck, 1992). These findings may help to explain recent reports that adolescents in the United States and Canada exhibited more academic and behavioral problems when their mothers moved from welfare to work if the family's economic situation became less stable in the process (Stepp, 2001).

Parents' lives are also influenced by the trajectories of their children's lives. For example, parents may need to alter their work trajectories to respond to the needs of a disabled or terminally ill child (Dungan, Jaquay, Reznik, & Sands, 1995; Seltzer & Heller, 1997). Or parents may forgo early retirement to assist their young adult children with education expenses.

Older adults and their adult children are also interdependent. The pattern of mutual support between older adults and their adult children is formed by life events and transitions across the life course (Hareven, 1996). It also may be fundamentally changed when families go through historical disruptions such as wars or major economic downturns. For example, the traditional pattern of intergenerational support is often disrupted when one generation migrates and another generation stays behind. It is also disrupted when the children in immigrant families pick up the new

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language and cultural norms faster than the adults in the family and take on the role of interpreter for their parents and grandparents (Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999).

What complicates matters is that family roles must often be synchronized across three or more generations at once. Sometimes, this synchronization does not go smoothly. Divorce, remarriage, and discontinuities in parents' work and educational trajectories may conflict with the needs of children (see, e.g., Ahrons, 1999; Cooksey et al., 1997). Similarly, the timing of adult children's educational, family, and work transitions often conflicts with the needs of aging parents (Hareven, 1996). The "generation in the middle" may have to make uncomfortable choices when allocating scarce economic and emotional resources. Families and individual family members may become especially vulnerable when juggling competing generational demands such as caregiving for an elder parent and parenting an adolescent (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). Therefore, when working with individuals in distress, it is important for social workers to learn about life events and transitions across generations.

Links with the wider world. A lot more is known at this point about the ways that individuals and their multigenerational families are interdependent than about the interdependence between individuals and families and other groups and collectivities. However, it is clear that work has a major effect on family transitions (George, 1993). Several trends in the organization of work are having a strong impact on family life trajectories. The labor force participation of women and men has been converging since 1960, and in recent years, workers have been working longer work weeks (Fullerton & Toossi, 2001). Between 1990 and 2000, the average worker in the United States increased the total hours worked per year by almost 1 week, from 1,942 hr in 1990 to 1,978 hr in 2000. Workers in the United States work more hours than workers in other industrialized countries. In 2000, the average worker in Australia, Canada, Japan, and Mexico worked about 100 hr, or 2.5 weeks, less than the average worker in the United States. The average German worker worked almost 500 hr, or 12.5 weeks, less than the average U.S. worker (International Labor Organization, 2001). In addition, work careers have become less secure in an era of mergers, downsizing, and contingent work.

Limited research has looked at the effects of neighborhoods on individual and family life trajectories. Existing research suggests that the family has much more influence on child and adolescent behaviors than the neighborhood does (Elder, 1998; Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999; Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, Gordon, & Chase-Lansdale, 1997). More differences in the behavior of children and adolescents have been found among families within a given neighborhood than have been found when comparing the families in one neighborhood with families in other neighborhoods. There is evidence, however, that the neighborhood effects may be greater for children living in high-poverty areas, which are often marked by violence and environmental health hazards, than for children living in low-poverty neighborhoods (Katz, Kling, & Liebman, 1999; Rosenbaum, 1991).

It is important for social workers to remember that lives are also linked in systems of institutionalized privilege and oppression. The life trajectories of members of minority groups in the United States are marked by discrimination and limited opportunity, which are experienced pervasively as daily insults and pressures. However, various cultural groups have devised unique systems of social support to cope with the "mundane extreme environments" in which they live (McAdoo, 1986, p. 189). Examples include the extensive and intensive natural support systems of Hispanic families (Falicov, 1999) and the special role of the church for African Americans (Billingsley, 1999).

Human Agency in Making Choices

The emphasis on human agency, or the use of personal power to achieve one's goals, may be one of the most positive contributions of the life course perspective (Elder, 1998; Hareven, 2000). A look at the discipline of social history helps to explain why human agency is such an important concept for social workers. By studying the lives of common people, in their efforts to correct the traditional focus on lives of elites, social historians have discovered that many groups once considered passive victims actually took independent action to cope with the difficulties imposed by power arrangements (Hareven, 2000). For example, historical research now shows that couples tried to limit the size of their families even in preindustrial societies (Wrigley, 1966); that slaves were often ingenious in their struggles to hold their families together (Gutman, 1976); and that factory workers used informal networks and kinship ties to manage, and sometimes resist, pressures for efficiency (Hareven, 1982). This attention to human agency by social historians is consistent with social work approaches that focus on individual, family, and community strengths (Saleebey, 1996).

Clearly, however, human agency has limits. Individuals' choices are constrained by the structural and cultural arrangements of a given historical era. Unequal opportunities give some members of society more personal power than others. The emphasis on human agency in the life course perspective has been aided by Albert Bandura's (1986) work on the two concepts of *self-efficacy*, a sense of personal competence, and *efficacy expectation*, an expectation that one can personally accomplish a goal (Elder, 1998). Bandura (1986) noted that social inequalities can result in low self-efficacy and low efficacy expectations among members of oppressed groups.

Diversity in Life Course Trajectories

Life course researchers have long had evidence, from large datasets, of diversity in developmental pathways.

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Early research emphasized differences between cohorts, but increasing attention is being paid to variability within cohort groups. A good indication of the diversity of life course trajectories is found in an often-cited study by Ronald Rindfuss and colleagues (Rindfuss et al., 1987). They examined the sequencing of five roles—work, education, homemaking, military, and other—among 6,700 men and 7,000 women for the 8 years following their high school graduation in 1972. The researchers found 1,100 different sequences of these five roles among the men and 1,800 different sequences among the women. This and other research on sequencing of life course transitions has called increasing attention to the heterogeneity of life course pathways (Settersten, 1998; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998; Shanahan et al., 1998).

Existing research indicates that, presently, men's life course trajectories are more rigidly structured, with fewer discontinuities, than women's. One explanation for this gender difference is that women's lives have been more strongly interwoven with the family domain than men's, and the family domain operates on nonlinear time, with many irregularities (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998). Men's lives are still more firmly rooted in domains outside the family, such as the paid work world, and these domains operate in linear time. Men's and women's life trajectories have started to become more similar, but this convergence is primarily because women's schooling and employment patterns are moving closer to men's, and not because men have become more involved in the family domain (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998). The different life trajectories of the present cohort of older men and women have resulted in older women being one of the poorest groups in U.S. society. Discontinuities in their work trajectories related to family responsibilities resulted in lower wages, lower Social Security benefits, and less likelihood to receive private pensions (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2002).

> The life course perspective, with its emphasis on life stories that unfold over time, is a particularly good fit with narrative approaches to social work.

Life course trajectories also vary by social class. In neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty, large numbers of youth drop out of school by the ninth grade (Kliman & Madsen, 1999). In contrast, youth in upper-middle-class and upper-class families expect an extended period of education with parental subsidies. These social class differences in educational trajectories are associated with differences in family and work trajectories. Affluent youth go to school and postpone their entry into adult roles of work and family. Less affluent youth, however, often enter earlier into marriage, parenting, and employment.

Research suggests that the family life trajectories in minority groups of color in the United States are different from the family life trajectories of Whites. Minority youth tend to leave home to live independently later than White youth do, at least in part because of the high value put on "kin-keeping" in many minority cultures (Stack, 1974). However, in a random sample from a major urban U.S. city, minority respondents gave earlier deadlines for leaving home than White respondents when questioned about the appropriate age for leaving home—even though the minority respondents actually left home at a later age than the White respondents (Settersten, 1998). This finding may reflect the bicultural conflict that complicates the lives of young adults in ethnic minority groups. It also may reflect differences in financial resources for leaving home.

Another source of diversity in a country with considerable immigration is the experience leading to the decision to immigrate, the journey itself, and the resettlement period (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999; Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999). There are many reasons that people immigrate; some immigrate to study, some for work, and others for improved life options. For some, the decision to immigrate may involve social, religious, or political persecution. The transit experience is sometimes traumatic. The resettlement experience requires establishment of new social networks, may involve changes in socioeconomic status, and presents serious demands for acculturating to a new physical and social environment. Gender, race, social class, and age all add layers of complexity to the migration experience. Family roles often have to be renegotiated as children outstrip older family members in learning the new language. Tensions can develop over conflicting approaches to the acculturation process (Fabelo-Alcover, 2001). Just as they should investigate their clients' educational, work, and family trajectories, social workers should be interested in the migration trajectories of their immigrant clients.

Developmental Risk and Protection

As the life course perspective has continued to evolve, it has more clearly emphasized the links between the life events and transitions of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Shanahan, 2000). The long-term impact of developmental experiences was the subject of the earliest life course research, Glen Elder's (1974) examination of longitudinal data for children from the Great Depression. Elder (1998) has recently more clearly enunciated the idea

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of developmental risk and protection as a major theme of the life course perspective: "[T]he developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events is contingent on when they occur in a person's life" (p. 3). Other life course scholars have suggested that it is not only simply the timing and sequencing of hardships but also their duration and spacing that provide risk for youth as they make the transition into adulthood. For instance, poverty alone is much less of a risk than chronic poverty (Shanahan, 2000). In addition, families are more vulnerable to getting off track when confronted simultaneously by multiple life events and transitions (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999).

A number of risk factors have emerged from life course research as well as evidence that both advantages and disadvantages accumulate over time (Bartley et al., 1997; O'Rand, 1996). Early deprivations and traumas do not inevitably lead to a trajectory of failure, however. Recent longitudinal research by Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith (2001), as well as that by George Vaillant (2002), indicates a human ability to bounce back from early deprivations and trauma, a capacity for "self righting" over time. This capacity for positive adaptation in the face of serious adversity is known as *resilience*. A set of protective factors have begun to be identified as the roots of resilience. They include strengths in biological makeup, psychological dispositions, a range of both familial and nonfamilial social supports, and life events that open opportunities. Experiences of early childhood lay the foundation for resilience, but there are many possibilities for recovery at later stages of development.

Strengths and Limitations of the Life Course Perspective

As a framework for social workers, the life course perspective has several advantages over traditional theories of human development. It encourages greater attention to the impact of historical and social change on human behavior, which seems particularly important in a rapidly changing society such as ours. Because it attends to biological, psychological, and social processes in the timing of lives, it provides the kind of multidimensional understanding that has been a hallmark of social work. Its emphasis on linked lives, appropriately, notes the primacy of intergenerational relationships and the interdependence of lives. At the same time, with its attention to human agency, the life course perspective is not as deterministic as some earlier theories and acknowledges people's strengths and capacity for change. Life course researchers are finding strong evidence for the malleability of risk factors and the possibilities for preventive interventions (Kellam & Van Horn, 1997). With attention to the diversity in life course trajectories, the life course perspective provides a good conceptual framework for culturally competent practice. And, finally, the life course perspective lends itself well to research that looks at cumulative advantage and cumulative disadvantage, adding to our knowledge about the impact of power and privilege and suggesting strategies for social justice.

To answer questions about how people change and how they stay the same across a life course is no simple task, however. It takes longitudinal research to recognize cohort effects. Although attention to diversity and heterogeneity may be the greatest strength of the life course perspective, heterogeneity may also be its biggest challenge. The life course perspective, like other behavioral science perspectives, searches for patterns of human behavior. But the present level of heterogeneity in complex societies such as the United States makes it difficult, if not nearly impossible at times, to discern patterns (George, 1993).

The life course perspective, with its emphasis on life stories that unfold over time, is a particularly good fit with narrative approaches to social work. Narrative practice focuses on helping clients examine the meanings they attribute to events in their life journeys (Kelly, 1996; Kelley, Blankenburg, & McRoberts, 2002; White & Epston, 1990). It is based on the assumption that humans are "meaning making agents" (Neimeyer, 1993, p. 222) who construct ideas, beliefs, and feelings in interaction with other people and social institutions. Narrative practice attempts to uncover clients' dominant story lines and to help clients move from "problem-saturated stories" (Kelley, 1996) to coping stories. Although narrative practice has received little empirical examination, small-scale exploratory projects have found evidence that this approach does contribute to better developed coping stories as well as improved coping behaviors (Besa, 1994; Kelley et al., 2002; Kelley & Clifford, 1997). Certainly, the life course perspective's emphasis on human agency is consistent with this attention to coping stories. Asking clients to construct multidimensional lifelines, as suggested in Figure A1, can be a good way to begin to examine dominant story lines. And, once constructed, the lifeline can be further examined to uncover coping story lines.

Like the life course perspective, the narrative approach to practice has the potential to bridge the micro and macro worlds (Vodde & Gallant, 2002). It has been used with individuals (Kirven, 2000; Pietsch, 2002), families (Besa, 1994; Kelley, 1996), and small groups (Gilbert & Beidler, 2001; Kelley et al., 2002), and is also being used for cultural healing at the community level (Center for Narrative Studies, n.d.). Because gender, culture, social class, and other types of diversity are considered a part of the story line, the narrative approach, like the life course perspective, can generate culturally sensitive practice.

Social workers have long embraced a person-environment perspective to understand situations encountered in practice. However, most of the theories in use are limited either in their attention to personal biographies or in the contextualization of personal biographies. The life course perspective is a good example of the benefits of the present trend toward theory and research that crosses disciplinary lines. By tending to historical time, social institutions, culture, relationships in social systems, and personal biographies, the life course perspective illuminates more

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dimensions of the person-environment configuration. By doing so, it can assist the social work profession in honoring its historic commitment to intervene at both the micro and macro levels.

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Manuscript received: July 17, 2003
Revised: February 23, 2004
Accepted: February 24, 2004

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