A life course of course!

What’s a life course? Think of a life course as a path – but it is not a straight path; it is a path with twists and turns. It has both changes and continuities.

A life course is from birth until death. Your life course is partly shaped by decisions you made earlier in life, but also partly by events that are beyond your control. Your development and behaviour is shaped by biological, psychological, social, historical and economic influences. As you move through life, the changes are marked by transition from one stage to the next.

What are the transitions?

Any transition is a developmental stage that involves significant cultural milestones (Stewart et al., 2001). Some examples of significant transitions are the transition from:

- Pre-school to primary school
- Being a couple to having children
- Full time work to retirement
- Primary school to high school
- High school to university
- Home to independent living
- Education to full-time work
- Dating to marriage
Transitions are age related (e.g.: you go to high school around 12 -13 years of age) and mostly relate to family life. A series of transitions is called a trajectory. Each person has their own trajectory which requires changes in roles and statuses that represent a distinct departure from prior roles and statuses (Elder & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2003).

Factors affecting your life course

A number of factors affect your life course and ultimately your identity.

An age effect is a change that occurs as you get older. Health, for example declines as you get older when the risk of heart disease increases. Age effects are not related to specific times, places or events in your life course. The physiological and biological changes take place regardless.

A period effect is the impact of a historical event on the entire society.

For example, September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York changed the way people thought about various things. New anti-terrorist laws were implemented in Australia, the numbers of people flying by aeroplane decreased and there was widespread prejudice towards Muslims which contributed to changing public opinion. A change in thoughts and actions on a micro level is called an ‘attitude conversion.’

Timing of life course transitions

Timing refers to the idea that there are appropriate ages for making various life course transitions (Elder, 1985). Commonplace remarks often reflect an implicit awareness of age norms: “She had her children late.” “He’s too old to be working so hard.” “She’s too young to wear makeup.” “He’s too old to be living at home with his parents.”

These age norms tell us when we are ‘on or off’ time’ for major life events. They are informal rules that specify age-appropriate roles and behaviour and, in so doing, provide a road map for traversing the course of life. These rules often remain unspoken until they are violated, and only then do we recognise that they exist. Age norms help to determine when people marry, how many children they have, and how they balance work and leisure. Age norms are constantly being redrawn because of changes in demography, the economy, and government policy. These deep transformations reorganise social life and alter individual patterns of growth and development (Hutchison, 2007).

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A cohort effect is the social change that occurs as one cohort replaces another. A cohort is a group of persons who were born at the same time and who experience particular social changes within a given culture in the same sequence and at the same age (Alwin & McCammon, 2003). It is different to a generation (typically a generation spans 25 years, whereas a cohort may span 10 years). One way to visualise the configuration of cohorts in a given society is through the use of a population pyramid.

For example, when members of an older cohort who hold one set of attitudes die, they are replaced by younger people who hold different attitudes. The attitudes of the population as a whole will shift as a result of this cohort replacement (Schuman et al., 1997). For instance, Australians, who were raised during World War II when animosity towards Japanese and Germans was at its peak, may hold more racist attitudes than their grandchildren, who grew up during the government policy of multiculturalism.

Another factor is that of human agency. Sociologists believe your sense of self changes over your life course. And, that you construct your life course through exercising human agency, or the use of personal power to achieve goals. Changes resemble life goals such as ‘find a partner’, some changes reflect current concerns such as ‘become a better student’, while others reflect longer term concerns such as ‘be more outgoing’(Hareven, 2000).

Duration of life course events

Duration refers to the number of years spent in each phase of the life course (Hagestad, 1990). The duration of life events is continually being transformed. One distinctive change in the duration of a life course phase is the extension of adolescence. Historically, adolescence ended when young people left the family home. Until about 1980, grown children were expected to become independent and not return home as permanent residents, regardless of whether they were single or married. In the past two decades, young people have remained longer in the parental home or left and then returned, creating a crowded nest (Schnaiberg and Goldenberg, 1989).

Sequencing of life course events

The idea of sequencing presumes that transitions should be made in a particular order (Rindfuss, Swicegood, and Rosenfeld, 1987). The implication is of orderliness and irreversibility. How orderly is the life course? In some cases, sequencing is quite apparent. Traditionally, people got married, moved out of home and then had children. Now people move out of home, have children and may / may not get married!

Disorder in the sequencing of life events may have negative consequences for later life transitions. For example, interrupted schooling and early parenthood are both associated with lower income later in life (Rindfuss, Swicegood, and Rosenfeld, 1987). The overlapping of life events may also create role conflicts. Middle-aged people who have both dependent children and ageing parents often are described as the ‘sandwich generation.’ When parenting, employment, and parent care coincide, the strains can be enormous.

Your tasks:
1. Compile a list of age norms you have seen breached.
2. Do people attempt to time major events in their life?
3. Discuss with a partner how the economy or government could impact age norms.
4. Can major historical events effect the life course of a whole generation?
5. Study the table for major life events and compare this to your parent’s life course.
6. Distinguish between the age, period and cohort effects on a person’s life course.
7. Can human agency override all other life course trajectories? Provide reasons for your answer.
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The proverbial “empty nest” has become the “crowded nest” as more young adults return to the parental home.

Garry Trudeau, “Doonesbury.” Copyright © 1991 by G. B. Trudeau. Reprinted with the permission of Universal Press Syndicate. All rights reserved.

Your tasks:

11. Why is the duration of life course events important when considering social and cultural norms?
12. Have some life course events shorted in duration while others have lengthened? Provide examples.
13. Examine the cartoon strip. Create your own short cartoon strip (either online or by sketching) that highlights conflict associated with the duration of life course events.
14. Can the sequencing of major life events create conflict? Should life course events be in a certain order? If so, which ones? And consider the implications of disorder.
**Impact of life events**

A *turning point* is a point in the life course that represents a substantial change or discontinuity in direction; it serves as a lasting change and not just a temporary detour (Rutter, 1996). As significant as they are to individuals’ lives, turning points usually become obvious only as time passes (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997).

### Exhibit 1.5: Life Change Events From the Holmes and Rahe Schedule of Recent Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Event</th>
<th>Stress Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death of a spouse</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital separation from mate</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detention in jail or other institutions</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of a close family member</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major personal injury or illness</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being fired at work</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital reconciliation with mate</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirement from work</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major change in the health or behavior of a family member</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual difficulties</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining a new family member (e.g., through birth, adoption, elder moving in)</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major business readjustment (e.g., merger, reorganization, bankruptcy)</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major change in financial state (a lot worse off or a lot better off than usual)</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of a close friend</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing to a different line of work</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major change in the number of arguments with spouse (more or less)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking out a mortgage or loan for a major purchase</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreclosure on a mortgage or loan</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major change in responsibilities at work (e.g., promotion, demotion, lateral transfer)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son or daughter leaving home</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble with in-laws</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outstanding personal achievement</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife beginning or ceasing work outside the home</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your tasks:

15. What is a turning point and how may it differ from simply a good or bad life experience?

16. Examine the table showing stress levels from life events. Do you agree with the rankings? Why / why not?

17. Reflect on any turning points you have had in your life so far and comment on the impact it has had on your life course and identity.

18. Use the metaphor of a ‘path through the woods’ such as the one depicted on the first page to write about your life course. You may even like to record it with background sounds using Audacity or other voice recording software.
Cross-cultural comparison - Aboriginal life course

We will now spend time researching and discussing the transition of Indigenous Australians through their life course (a distinctly different life course to your own!) by engaging in the following activities:

• **View** *Ten Canoes* (2006) 90 minutes. The film is set in Arnhem Land and is a humorous story about the people of Ramingining. The past is in colour to represent the richness of culture and the present is in black and white. Take notes under the following subheadings – traditional society, symbols of culture, gender roles, social structure, power and authority, identity, conflict, environment.

• **Read** and take notes on “The average Aboriginal Australian’s life’ at [http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/people/aboriginal-statistic-timeline](http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/people/aboriginal-statistic-timeline)


• **Investigate** the relationship between ‘walkabout’ as a rite of passage and songlines

• **Optional academic reading**: The following URL contains dense information about indigenous people’s life course in Australia. It was a study by the Australian National University, Canberra based on data from the 2006 Census of Population and Housing. The publication has a range of chapters including, family, migration, education, employment, housing, health and childhood. [http://epress.anu.edu.au/apps/bookworm/view/Demographic+and+Socioeconomic+Outcomes+Across+the+Indigenous+Australian+Lifecourse/5111/ch01.xhtml#toc-anchor](http://epress.anu.edu.au/apps/bookworm/view/Demographic+and+Socioeconomic+Outcomes+Across+the+Indigenous+Australian+Lifecourse/5111/ch01.xhtml#toc-anchor)

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**Extension Essay**

Discuss the following statement: Increased delay and dispersion of the timing of life course events is associated with the perception that young people must invest in human capital formation to a much greater degree than was the case in the past.

Don’t forget to thoroughly research and carefully plan your response. Address both sides of the statement / argument and reach a logical conclusion.