Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research

Michael J. Shanahan
Jeylan T. Mortimer
Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson *Editors*

Handbook of the Life Course

Volume II

Springer

Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research

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About the Editors

Michael J. Shanahan is Professor of Sociology and Faculty Fellow at the Carolina Population Center and at the Center for Developmental Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is interested in individual differences in the life course, a theme that he has studied with reference to genetics, health, and personality. His recent articles appear in *Social Forces*, *Developmental Psychology*, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, and *Social Science and Medicine*. His current research examines associations between social circumstances and gene transcription both early and later in the life course.

Jeylan T. Mortimer is Professor of Sociology and Founding Director of the Life Course Center, University of Minnesota, and Principal Investigator of the longitudinal, three-generation Youth Development Study. Her interests span the areas of work and socioeconomic attainment, the life course, and youth and transition to adulthood. Her recent articles appear in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *Social Forces*, the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Developmental Psychology*, the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, and *Demography*. Her current research examines intergenerational change and transmission of achievement orientations, the impacts of prior parental experiences and trajectories on their adolescent children, and the sources of resilience in the transition to adulthood. Professor Mortimer is Chair of the Section on Aging and the Life Course in the American Sociological Association. She previously served as Chair of the ASA Sections on Children and Youth and Social Psychology.

Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson is Professor of Sociology and Honors College Distinguished Professor at Washington State University. Her research interests are in the areas of work, family, and education across the life course, with particular focus on well-being and achievement in adolescence and the transition to adulthood. Her recent research has appeared in the *American Journal of Sociology*, *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, *Social Science Research*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Social Forces*, and *Social Psychology Quarterly*. Her current research focuses on families' and young

people's adaptations to the changing nature of the transition to adulthood, including familial financial support in young adulthood and its implications for attainment and well-being; change in educational and work ambitions tied to changing personal and historical circumstances; and the interplay of stratification and the development of social psychological resources in promoting well-being and attainment.

Introduction: Life Course Studies – Trends, Challenges, and Future Directions

Michael J. Shanahan, Jeylan T. Mortimer, and Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson

The *Handbook of the Life Course* was published in 2003 ("*Handbook I*") and aspired to provide "an overview of key theoretical perspectives, concepts, and methodological approaches that, while applied to diverse phenomena, are united in their general approach to the study of lives across age phases" (Mortimer and Shanahan 2003). In revisiting *Handbook I*, we were heartened to discover its continued usefulness and relevance. A cursory examination of citation patterns reveals that it has been cited frequently as a corporate work, and many chapters were also well-received. Further, most of its chapters remain relevant, inspiring, and creative contributions more than a decade after they were written. Indeed, with little effort, any of its essays could be updated.

Given the sustained usefulness of *Handbook I*, we agreed to edit a new "*Handbook II*" not as a second edition (i.e., an update) but rather as a second volume (i.e., with a distinct charge): the identification of new and emerging problems, concepts, methods, research questions, and analytic strategies. Nevertheless, although the handbooks have unique purviews, they are not wholly distinct. *Handbook I* provides an overview of life course studies but also identifies many themes for future research. Indeed, Section VII is entitled "The Future of the Life Course" and includes essays by leading scholars of life course sociology. *Handbook II* is forward-looking, charting directions for future research, yet the chapters in the second volume must necessarily provide foundations on which to build. Thus, many of the present chapters provide concise, selective histories of their topics. In the final analysis, both volumes offer overviews of subfields and directions for future research; the difference is one of emphasis, with the present volume highlighting the latter.

In describing the contents of this volume, we note connections between the two handbooks, and unique features of each. First, however, we revisit an observation made in *Handbook I*: that life course studies is growing by proverbial "leaps and bounds," in large part because of its growing use in fields beyond sociology. This diffusion creates exciting opportunities for interdisciplinary work, but it also challenges the field to maintain a coherent, paradigmatic core.

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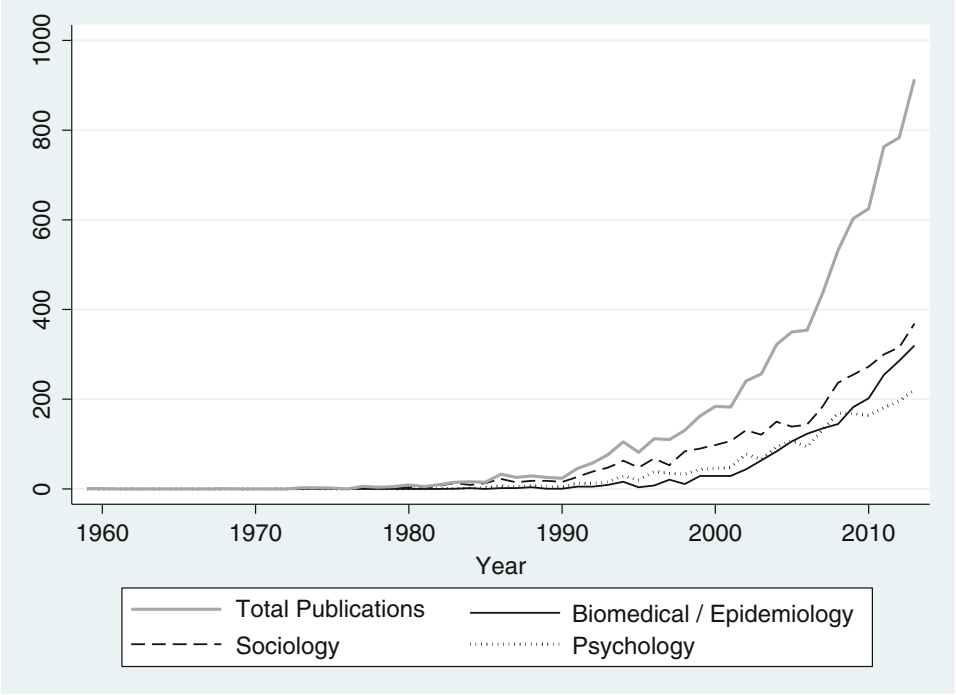

Fig. 1 Number of life course publications per year

1 Growth, Diffusion, Opportunities and Challenges

Although gauging the growth of life course studies is difficult, we gain some descriptive traction by way of a simple citation analysis (Shanahan and Freeman 2012). Drawing on the Thomson/Reuters Web of Science, we searched for papers in which the topic, title, or theme included "life course." The resulting record count (number of journal publications) can be broken down into year and disciplines ("Web of Science Categories").[1] This strategy is subject to several important qualifications (principally, papers can be classified into more than one Web of Science category, and books and chapters are often not included), but we doubt the overall conclusions would change appreciably if these limitations could be addressed.

Figure 1 shows the number of life course journal publications per year overall and for sociological, psychological, and biomedical/epidemiological Web of Science categories. The results reveal several interesting trends. First, there was very little publication activity prior to 1990. Indeed, as late as 1998, there were only 84 sociological journal articles featuring the life course. (There were, however, citations to books and chapters prior to 1998 that are not included in the figure). Second, 1990 was a "tipping point," after which the number of life course publications began to increase appreciably. In fact, regression analyses support the hypothesis that 1990 is the likely deflection point for total journal publication count. Third, also confirmed by regression modeling, the growth rate in publications follows a quadratic pattern. This pattern of rapid growth characterizes the total and discipline-specific journal publication count. Finally, annual growth

[1] We thank Autumn McClelland for assistance with these analyses. Results available on request from Michael Shanahan.

rates in other disciplines reveal that life course publications in sociology have been at or slightly below the total growth rate (for all publications). Over a 10-year period (from 2000 to 2010), Biomedical/Epidemiology publications increased by 302 %, whereas the total rate of growth for all "life course" publications was 267 % (for Sociology, 249 %; for Psychology, 263 %).

Given limitations to these analyses, we should not be overly concerned with exact estimates. Viewed in broad terms, however, the results are consistent with our impressions: life course studies are clearly characterized by vibrant growth, and much of this growth, especially in the past 5- to 10 years, is driven by publications beyond the discipline of sociology.

This interdisciplinary diffusion is a testament to the value of life course studies, but it also raises the issue of intellectual cohesiveness. The issue of cohesiveness is yet more vexing because of the status of the life course as a paradigm. Traditionally, the *concept* of the life course refers to the age-graded roles that structure (or create patterns in) biography. The concept in turn gave rise to a set of related ideas, hypotheses, and techniques that collectively create a paradigm, or imaginative framework. Compared to a theory—a set of formally interrelated propositions that organizes observations and generates predictions—the content, boundaries, and emphases of a paradigm are less easy to identify with a high degree of consensus. Thus, even within sociology, the life course has a diversity of meanings. This point is vividly illustrated by several chapters in this volume that focus on health, yet with little substantive overlap among them.

The diffusion of the life course and its status as a paradigm create both a challenge and an opportunity for life course studies. On the one hand, as the life course paradigm diffuses from sociology into other fields of study, the challenge of intellectual cohesiveness arises: is there an intellectual core that informs life course studies of diverse phenomena such as occupational careers, criminal careers, cardiovascular disease, cognition, and functional limitations? Or, much as James House (1977) did for social psychology, can we identify distinctly different "faces" of life course research? Or, has "life course" become an ambiguous rubric? On the other hand, this same diffusion creates opportunities for intellectual cross-pollination. A great deal of scientific progress depends on the concepts and methods from one field of study informing the science of another field. Moreover, many branches of science—natural, behavioral, and social—are adopting a systems view that encourages viewing the full complexity of research questions, thereby traversing traditional disciplinary boundaries. Thus, the challenge facing life course sociology—the coherent core versus interdisciplinary diffusion—is a particular instance of a problem faced by many successful fields of study. We invite readers to consider this tension between cohesiveness and cross-pollination as they peruse the two handbooks.

2 Organization of *Handbook II*

We begin *Handbook II* with essays on the historical emergence of life course studies, explicating and critically evaluating key foundational concepts and ideas that animate this field of inquiry. The historical perspective offered by Bynner emphasizes the importance of longitudinal data to the emergence of life course research and its institutionalization; he urges heightened efforts to connect basic science with policy. Fundamental concepts covered in Section I include the birth cohort, which locates people in history, and age phases, the basic division of the biography into a sequence of age-graded segments. Section I closes with three essays urging researchers to focus on societal forces that create biographic patterns, focusing on the increasing differentiation of age grading and its subjective consequences; on the frequent misuse of models positing a "free-standing individual" in life course explanations of individual differences; and on the central role of intergenerational families in bridging macro and micro perspectives. These essays provide a much-needed corrective as life course scholars continue to study individual-level phenomena such as health and genetics, and as they engage in interdisciplinary research.

Section II applies the life course perspective to the changing institutions and organizations that powerfully shape biographical patterns within and across cohorts and age phases. Traditionally, these social forces have included the family, education, and work, all of which are covered in the present volume. Particularly in the American context, military service in theaters of armed conflict and time spent in the criminal justice system shape the lives of a substantial proportion of the population, and there is now growing awareness across nations of the potentially profound long-term effects of both natural and man-made disasters. Excepting disasters and military service, these topics are also covered in *Handbook I*, and the present contributions seek to highlight recent developments and future directions.

Section III presents a series of essays on health and development. As shown in Fig. 1, health has emerged as a major theme in life course research. In the American context especially, life course studies include a micro interest in individual differences, and this theme is explored in several chapters that offer developmentally-informed life course perspectives on physical and mental health, poverty, cognition, and agency. *Handbook I* also included essays on agency and health, as well as on connections between childhood and adulthood, substance use, personality, and biology.

Having covered fundamental concepts and applications of the life course perspective, *Handbook II* turns to research methods in Section IV. *Handbook I* examines models that are well-suited to common types of data in the life course tradition: age-period-cohort, event-history, panel, and latent pathways. There is also a chapter on the qualitative study of social change and people's narrative autobiographies. *Handbook II* covers new topics that are at the forefront of life course research: longitudinal qualitative research, causal analysis, growth curve models, three-generation studies, and spatial analysis.

Finally, Section V returns to a major theme of John Bynner's first chapter: the increasing necessity to connect life course research with policy. Presently, few life course scholars have been trained in policy analysis and few policy-makers draw on a life course framework. *Handbook II* closes with essays by leading scholars who are building bridges between basic life course research and policy.

We turn now from this organizational portrait to commentary on the chapters in this volume. Our purpose is not to summarize each chapter, but rather to highlight select themes and future directions for research and, in so doing, encourage close readings of chapters. Table 1 presents a highly select summary of broadly-stated themes for future research that are to be found across essays in this volume. Again, our purpose with Table 1 is not to comprehensively list all future directions for life course studies, but rather to highlight select, major themes and to encourage closer reading of the volume.

3 Section I: Foundations of Life Course Research

John Bynner's essay on the institutionalization of life course studies is an appropriate starting point because he discusses the historical emergence of life course studies and their expansion and consolidation to the present, including the recent founding of the Society for Longitudinal and Life Course Studies. Bynner's thesis is that the history of life course studies is best told in terms of the history and expansion of longitudinal data collection. He provides a superb overview of the proliferation of longitudinal data in Europe and the United States. Indeed, he notes that longitudinal data collection is now "industrial" in scope, with consortia emerging to harmonize efforts and to develop a clear understanding of the types of data that are being collected with respect to broad themes such as child health and household dynamics. *Handbook I* also began with a historical perspective (Elder, Crosnoe, and Johnson), but one told with different emphasis: the emergence of life course principles based on early empirical work. With their differing historiographies—the central role of data and the emergence of theory—these chapters jointly provide a concise, rich story of the emergence of a new, vibrant, multidisciplinary, and international intellectual community.