Introductions

Studies of the life course emerged in response to the sociological need to understand how social change intersects with the aging process. In this course, we will not only examine how social pathways unfold, but will also consider how they are a product of a particular place and time. Social forces create opportunities and constraints, but individuals use choice to create unique biographies. We will put an emphasis on:
- how individuals construct their life course in the context of social structure,
- the importance of context and how individuals experience context differently as they age,
- how individuals experience events differently depending on their place in the life course, and
- how lives are linked together through social relationships

Required Readings

All assigned journal articles and book chapters are available to you on the Learn@UW page for the class. You can choose whether you want to read the assigned readings as PDFs on your computer, or print out the PDFs. Regardless of how you choose to access the readings, you are expected to have completed the readings prior to the start of class.

Course Requirements

Midterm Exam – October 27 30%
Interview Plan – October 25 5%
Life Course Interview and Paper – December 13 25%
Final Exam – December 22 30%
Online discussion posts 5%
Class Participation 5%

Life Course Interview, Interview Plan and Paper

Over the course of the semester, you will not only learn the theoretical concepts associated with the life course, but will also gain an introduction to the methods that are used to understand these processes. In particular, you will receive training about how to collect a life history narrative.
We will spend considerable time in class discussing interview techniques, preparing a survey instrument, and reviewing your interview experiences.

After we have discussed the life course interview in class, you will break into groups of five or six to brainstorm your interview plan. For this class, attendance is mandatory (October 20). You will be expected to work together outside of class to plan the content of your interviews. Although all class members must collect their interview as individuals, groups should work together to plan the interviews and to provide support for each other. Individual interview plans must be submitted in class on October 25.

All interviews must be completed by November 29, the day that they will be discussed in class. On that day, attendance is mandatory, and the groups will reconvene. You will be expected to give a brief summary of your interview to your fellow group members. These group discussions will be an opportunity for you to begin connecting your data to the key concepts that we have covered in class, and should serve as a foundation for your course paper. For your course paper, you will summarize your respondent’s narrative and interpret it using the concepts covered by the course. All papers must be written individually, but the best papers will be expected to draw comparisons between their respondent’s experiences and those of other group members. Your paper is due in class on December 13 and must be 8-10 pages long, double spaced, 12-pt font. In addition to a bibliography, you must also include a copy of your interview notes.

You are strongly discouraged from missing class on either October 25 or November 29. Absences on either day that have not been approved in advance will result in the subtraction of 5% from your final course grade for each absence (absence from both classes will result in the loss of a full letter grade). You will also be at a significant disadvantage in the preparation of your life course interview and paper.

**Online Discussion Posts and Class Participation**

All students are expected to have read the assigned readings prior to class. Class sessions will be a combination of lecture and discussion and all students should be prepared to participate. In order to encourage critical thinking about the assigned readings and to stimulate classroom discussions, all students are expected to post a comment or question about the readings on the Learn@UW discussion boards by 11 p.m. the evening before class.

In order to receive full credit for the online discussion posts, students must post a question or a comment for at least 20 class sessions. Comments are expected to show thought and critical engagement with the readings and with your classmates’ comments. Good posts might include any of the following:

- Questions that seek clarification about concepts and issues mentioned in the reading
- Critiques of the assigned readings
- Evaluation of how the readings connect to concepts that we have previously discussed in class
- Observations about anything that you found interesting, surprising, or important in the readings
Discussion about current events, readings from other classes, or other thoughts that relate to the topics we are discussing in class

Comments on your classmates’ posts

You are encouraged to comment on your classmates’ posts and I hope that the discussion boards will begin conversations that we can continue in the classroom. I know that many students are shy about participating in class discussion and hope that the online discussion posts will serve as a way for these students to demonstrate their engagement with the readings and class materials. However, you are still expected to participate in class. Ask questions. Participate in discussion. Don’t read the newspaper or text your friends. Above all, you are expected to attend every class session, unless you notify me by email or voice mail prior to the start of class.

Final Exam

The final exam will consist of essays that ask you to critically evaluate the materials that we have covered in class and in the assigned readings. It will draw on all concepts that have been covered over the entire semester. The final exam is scheduled for Thursday, December 22, at a time to be determined.

Lectures and Readings

9/6 Introduction


9/8 Age, Cohort, and Generation


9/13 Lives in Context: The Great Depression

Glen Elder. 1975. Children of the Great Depression. Chapters 1 and 10

9/15 Lives in Context: International Events

Marina Adler. 2002. “German unification as a turning point in East German women’s life course: Biographical changes in work and family roles.” Sex Roles 47:83-98.

9/20-9/22 Agency and Individual Action


9/27-9/29 **Cumulative (Dis)Advantage**


10/4 **Linked Lives: Socio-economic Status**


10/6 **Education**


10/11 **Work**


10/13

**Linked Lives – Family Structure**


10/18

**Life Course Research Methods**


10/20

**Training for Life Course Interviews – ATTENDANCE MANDATORY**

10/25

**INTERVIEW PLAN DUE**

10/25

**Age Norms**


10/27

**Midterm Exam**

11/1

**(De)Standardization of the Life Course**


11/3  
**Transition to Adulthood**


11/8  
**Life Course Disruptions**


11/10-11/15  
**Movie: 42 Up**

11/17  
**Family Transitions—Marriage and Childbearing**


11/22  
**Consequences of Divorce**


11/24  
THANKSGIVING – NO CLASS

11/29  
**Discuss Qualitative Interviews – MANDATORY ATTENDANCE**
12/1 **Family Transitions**—**Widowhood**


12/6-12/8 **Health and the Life Course**


12/13 **LIFE COURSE INTERVIEW/ESSAY DUE**

12/13 **Retirement**


12/15 **Social networks and inequality at older ages**


12/22 **FINAL EXAM – 7:25-9:25 pm**