The Life Course, Social Change and the Chicago Tradition

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of work when there is no work,
others when there are wars."
Everett Hughes, 1971

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Human lives carry the imprint of their particular social worlds, and times of rapid change can bring incoherence and disorder. Some of this disruption appears in the lives of men and women who live through the end of a political regime and the final days of a war, a change most dramatic for members of Japan's Imperial officer corps in 1945 who suddenly lost a career and favored position in society (Cook, 1983). Similar changes have occurred in Eastern Europe as a result of the political changes after 1988. These observations and others illustrate what is arguably the most distinctive feature of life course studies today (Elder, 1991); a widespread awareness of the connections between lives and society. To understand the social pathways of life, one must consider the effects of environmental change across the life span. People age in different ways in response to an ever-changing world.

In this essay I explore the relation between human lives and their changing environments by drawing upon an emerging perspective on the life course that has roots in the early Chicago school of sociology (Bulmer, 1984) and social science, and in issues posed by social change. The life course refers to age-graded life patterns which are embedded in social institutions and subject to historical change. Ideas central to this perspective have come from many quarters, including the writings of W.I. Thomas, a key figure in the early Chicago school of sociology. I begin with an overview of two eras of

studying social change in lives, then the limitations of cohort research, and conclude with linking mechanisms between lives and their changing world.

Historical Phases of Life Course Study

The accelerating pace of city growth, industrial change, and mass immigration around the turn of the century heightened the problematic features of lives. At this time Walter Lippmann (1914, p. 152) observed in the United States that "there isn't a human relation, whether of parent or child, husband or wife, worker and employer, that doesn't move in a strange situation". Reflecting upon their pioneering study of Middletown some twenty years later, Robert and Helen Lynd (1937) were even more insistent on the uniqueness of this changeful time; "we today are probably living in one of the eras of greatest rapidity of change in the history of human institutions".

Seminal efforts to study these social changes remain notable today for the questions and issues they posed about the effects of a rapidly changing society. Fifty years later many of these issues, still unresolved, reappeared, but at a time when social scientists had more understanding of the link between life history and social history. In particular, the cohort approach seemed to offer an effective way to study this connection. I turn to some of these developments as background for the task of relating lives to a changing world.

Era I. Preliminary Studies

In a landmark study of early social science, Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-20) investigated the migratory experience of Polish peasants as they left

their rural homeland for major urban centers in Europe and the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Polish Peasant in Europe and America provides an ethnographic and historical account of village and country life in Poland and of the immigrants' settlement in their new urban environments. Immigrant lives embodied the discontinuities and strains of the age. They were socialized for a world that soon became only a memory.

Data for The Polish Peasant came from letters and life histories, agency records and field observations. However, the study's lasting value does not reside in this foundation or in the data analysis and the facts produced. Rather it comes from its conceptual approach, a processual view of group and individual experience in changing and historically specific times, but one that does not lose sight of the larger context and its social trends. The principal aim is to explicate the process by which change occurs in group structure and the lives of members. As Thomas observed, "a social institution can be fully understood only if we do not limit ourselves to the abstract study of its formal organization, but analyze the way in which it appears in the personal experience of various members of the group and follow the influence which it has upon their lives . . . " (Volkart, 1951, p. 147).

The ambitious scope of this project called for a view of people's lives over time in a changing environment. Continuous life records, whether retrospective or prospective, offered such a view, and W.I. Thomas became an advocate of life history data and the longitudinal study. Writing in the mid-1920s, he strongly urged that priority be given to the "longitudinal approach to life history" (Volkart, 1951, p. 593). Studies, he argued, should investigate "many types of life in different situations" and follow "groups of

individuals into the future, getting a continuous record of experiences as they occur."

Little is actually known about the scientific reception of Thomas's proposal for longitudinal studies among developmentalists at the time, though appropriate initiatives along this line were underway by the end of the 1920s. The earliest major venture was directed by Lewis Terman (1925, 1947), a psychologist at Stanford who launched a study of gifted children in 1922. The more than 1500 children, born between 1904 and 1917, were surveyed again in 1928 and then at approximately five year intervals up to 1960 and then from 1972 through 1986. Over 900 men and women completed forms in 1982. The various follow-ups did not ensure the development of life records with reasonable complete entries by year. For example, questions about work and earnings were not even asked for certain years. The study also nearly succeeded in not collecting any systematic information on the Study members' life experience through the Great Depression and World War II, two of the most encompassing social dislocations of this century.

The same point can be made about longitudinal studies that were launched just before the Great Depression at the old Institute of Child Welfare (now called Human Development) at the University of California-Berkeley (Eichorn, Clausen, Haan, Honzik, and Mussen, 1981): Nancy Bayley's Berkeley Growth Study, Jean Macfarlane's Berkeley Guidance Study (both with birth years of 1928-29), and the Oakland Adolescent or Growth Study directed by the late Harold Jones. Initially restricted in focus to development across the pre-adult years, all three samples have been followed up to late life and the 1980s. Looking back across the publications on these lives, one is struck by

the inattention of investigators to the changing world in which Study members and their families lived their lives.

A changing environment beyond the family did not inform the original investigators' conceptual models. Children in the Oakland and Berkeley studies grew up in the Great Depression and were strongly influenced by World War II, yet neither of these historical events were considered relevant for developmental research at the time. An ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was clearly not a popular view of the developing child in psychology. Nevertheless, a number of processes in the socioeconomic environment of the 1930s and 1940s were included in the data collections of this period. But they remained unused for the most part until the mid-1960s when social change again became a salient issue in the social sciences and politics.

The second wave of life course studies combines theoretical models of the life course, longitudinal samples or retrospective records, and statistical advances in the modeling of life course development and its relation to a changing world. Procedures for collecting, storing, and retrieving continuous records of experience were also a product of this new wave of research (Freedman, et al., 1985). If we believe that research questions emerge out of the distinctive historical times of investigators, it is not surprising that this new wave of research is uniquely distinguished by its attention to relations between life patterns and the historical record. Developmentalists (Schaie, 1965) as well as sociologists of aging (Riley, Johnson, and Foner, 1972) underscored the bond between lives in a changing society, and longitudinal studies (eg. Elder, 1974) pursued this objective.

Era II. The Life Course in a Changing World

The intellectual milieu of the 1960s offered a distinctive view of the life course as a field of inquiry, a view that reflected the growing recognition of variability in lives among social scientists who were studying development, aging, and cohorts. This new consciousness focused in part on the wide variability of age patterns in lives. Contrary to modal views of age-grading in cultures (Eisenstadt, 1956), people of the same age do not march in concert across major events of the life course. They vary in pace and sequencing, and this variation has real consequences for people and society (Hogan, 1981). In addition, the new work on aging underscored the role of historical variation in lives according to social change and cohort differences.

Social variations in the life course were also documented by career studies within the Chicago tradition (Hughes, 1971) and by a program of research on age patterns directed by Bernice Neugarten at the University of Chicago (with Datan, 1973). As life trajectories, careers have objective and subjective features. They are marked by status passages or transitions and through have links to institutions relate the individual to the social order (Barley, 1989). They also possess turning points which entail changes in life direction. Neugarten's research brought age and timing to these experiences. She developed a normative perspective on the life course which featured the concept of normative timetables and individual deviations from such expectations. Departures from the usual timetable generally entail social and

psychological consequences, from informal sanctions to lost opportunities and life course disorder.

The concept of career in the Chicago tradition, as a social pathway, provided a way of thinking about the life course for a number of years. In the mid-1970s, I wrote that "the full significance of event-timing in the life course is seen within the context of interdependent careers. With multiple career lines, the scheduling of events and obligations becomes a basic problem in the management of resources and pressures. Scheduling involves the timing, spacing, and arrangement of events, both within and across life paths ... (Elder, 1978:27). More recently, the concept of trajectory has gained favor because it is not tied to the conceptual limitations and surplus meanings of career within the field of occupations (Elder, 1985). The concept of a trajectory refers to a lifeline or career, a pathway over the life span which may vary in direction and rate of change. Specific transitions or changes in state are embedded in trajectories that give them form and meaning. Understanding the impact of a life transition requires knowledge of its temporal context, such as divorce and widowhood in one's thirties or fifties, and of the resources people bring to it. Another example of increasing importance involves births to adolescents and adult women nearing the age of 40.

Several lines of inquiry gave birth to a concept of life patterns in particular historical times; an interactional perspective on life and social history. Within the field of work and social institutions, Everett Hughes (1971:124) observed that "some people come to the age of work when there is no work, others when there are wars . . . Such joining of a man's life with events, large and small, are his unique career and given him many of his

personal problems." Reflecting his training at the University of Chicago, the anthropologist Robert Redfield (1955:63) expressed support for a biographical perspective that captures the interplay of lives and their changing world. During epochs of rapid change, "the career of any one kind of person, man or woman, factory worker or business man, becomes within itself inconsistent and inconclusive . . . the ends of life become obscure."

Missing from this Chicago-based perspective is a framework to guide research on the connections between social history and lives, a framework later provided by social demographers and a perspective on the life course. In the field of demography, Norman Ryder (1965) proposed the concept of cohort for studying the relation between social change and life patterns. With its "life-stage principle," the essay provided a valuable point of departure toward greater understanding of the interplay between social change and lives; the impact of an historical event on cohort life patterns reflects the stage at which the change was experienced. Differences in life stage tell us something about the adaptive resources, options, and meanings that become potential elements in linking social change to life outcomes.

A major statement on the connections between social and historical age in the life course appeared in Aging and Society (Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972). Age represents a basis of historical differentiation through birth cohorts and of social differentiation according to age-graded statuses and role sequences. Age strata thus order both people and social roles. Socialization and role allocation link people and social roles in the process of aging and cohort successive. This connection between historical and social age sensitized research to the variable meaning of life events in history. Divorce is a case in point. With the sharply rising divorce rate from the

1960s to the 1980s, one might expect some change in the meaning and psychological effects of divorced parents for children.

From its rudimentary stage in the 1960s to the present, the life course and its dynamics define a theoretical orientation that identifies relevant problem foci and variables, and structures the generation of evidence and hypotheses. In this orienting function, the life course perspective suggests questions, rationales for why they are important, and actual specifications of the questions for research purposes. The bearing of research on theory is equally important - the active role of longitudinal studies in shaping perspectives on the life course. Concerning this general influence, Merton (1968, pp. 162-8) refers to unexpected findings and the discovery of new data that exert pressures for new theory.

Children of the Great Depression

This study (Elder, 1974) is part of these intellectual developments in the social sciences and its roots extend back to Thomas and Znaniecki's The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (1918-20). Using longitudinal data from the Oakland Growth Study at the University of California-Berkeley (birth years, 1920-21), the study traced the effects of drastic income loss during the early 1930s to the experience of adolescents and their middle years in postwar America. The massive economic collapse of the Great Depression assigned families and children to different life circumstances with little regard for their prior station in life. In this natural experiment, some families suffered heavy losses whereas others were largely spared hardship. Within the middle and working class of 1929, the study compared children from nondeprived and deprived families across the 1930s to the Second World War, and then followed them to the middle years. The effects of drastic income

loss were thus assessed according to a model that depicted the family and its adaptations as a link between economic decline and the child's experience.

Another challenge concerned the problem of how to think about the lives of individuals. How are lives socially patterned? The conventional literature on careers offered ideas about single careers, mainly in the field of work. The pathways of work and family were still largely viewed as separate lines of inquiry. Nevertheless, some valuable guidance came from the social meanings of age in expectations and sanctions, as presented in the work of Bernice Neugarten. Families, I soon discovered, sometimes responded to economic scarcity by changing the timing of work and family events, and by improving the synchrony of interrelated career lines. The conceptual distinctions of Wilensky's Labor and Leisure study (1960) proved to be exceedingly valuable in shaping a conceptual model of the social life course.

This developmental path owes much to the influence of sociologists and behavioral scientists who were trained at the University of Chicago. Literally every one of the author's mentors was trained at this institution. For example, Charles Bowerman and John Clausen were trained at Chicago and studied under Ernest Burgess and Herbert Blumer. Harold Wilensky, whose creative approach to life trajectories profoundly shaped my perspective on lives, received his doctorate in sociology from the University of Chicago in the mid-1950s.

The distinctive features of the early Chicago school, in particular, strongly favored a contextual approach to lives and human development. They include an emphasis on empirical research, as against speculation; the insistence that people and groups be studied in their natural ecology; attention to the historical perspective - many of the classic works from the

Chicago school are explicitly historical; a preference for multidisciplinary approaches and projects; and a keen problem orientation - Chicago-type studies focused on the problems of community, institutions, and people, as in mass migration, urban poverty, crime, and family disorder.

In view of these biographical connections to the Chicago school, it is not surprising to note that Children of the Great Depression and related work has important ties to The Polish Peasant. First, the Depression research investigated a type of problem that had much in common with the traditional experience of immigration from the old world to the urban-industrial environment of large cities, such as Chicago. Children followed people and family units from the prosperous 1920s across the hard times of the 1930s. Some families lost heavily in the economic collapse, whereas others were largely spared this misfortune. In this natural experiment, such differences enabled a comparative design involving relatively nondeprived and deprived families.

The Polish Peasant's other contribution to Children of the Great Depression is conceptual. We see this in a dynamic view of group and individual experience across changing and historically specific times, one which does not lose sight of the larger setting and its social trends. The principal objective is to explicate the process by which change occurs in group structure and in the lives of members.

Well before work began on The Polish Peasant, Thomas outlined a model of crisis situations, one that assigned priority to the control of life situations in social experience (1909, pp. 13-26). Habitual patterns of behavior are maintained by situations in which the group or individual is able to produce outcomes that are in line with certain claims or expectations.

Crises arise from a sharp disparity between claims and control, between expectations and the resources to achieve desired benefits. As a "disturbance of habit," crises heighten attentional capacities and the search for effective responses, possibly leading to a revision of the individual methods of control that give structure to life experience. Adaptations to the new situation and its demands represent efforts to restore control over one's life, but under terms of the new situation.

Three models illustrate different forms of the gap between claims and resources and call attention to different types of family and individual adaptation. First, aspirations may climb well above achievements or resources in a period of rapid economic growth. Following the severe economic depression of the early 1930s, economic aspirations rose sharply among Americans who were weary of doing without. The more their aspirations surpassed available resources, the greater the sense of frustration. Durkheim (1951:248) refers to this dynamic as the "malady of unlimited aspiration." The more people have, the more they want in an ever escalating spiral.

In another scenario, claims remain fairly stable over time despite a sharp loss of income. This loss could occur through unemployment and failed businesses or through rampant inflation which diminishes the purchasing power of the dollar. In either case, available resources fall well below desires. Resource loss from unemployment calls for efforts to generate more income and to reduce expenditures. By comparison, an inflationary time provides less as a means of control. The dollar may continue to lose value in the face of efforts to produce higher earnings.

A third type of gap is illustrated by discontinuities between available resources before and after a crisis situation. Historically, this is seen in

the process of immigration experience. In migrating to America from the impoverished countryside of feudal 19th century Poland, immigrants brought old skills from a rural society to an urban, industrial environment. The resulting discontinuity is experienced as a loss of mastery or control by new immigrants. Likewise, aspirations suited for the Polish countryside were inappropriate for urban America.

As elaborated from Thomas's early writings on crisis situations, this conceptualization proved especially useful in thinking about the consequences of family change for the individual in the hard pressed 1930s. Change in Depression families became a way to view the diverse experiences of children in the 1930s. But what about the long term effects of the change? How should we think about this legacy? Satisfactory answers to such questions did not arise until studies of age in the 1960s began to bring temporality to families and individuals.

Much has been learned about studying lives in a changing society from the second wave of life course research and theory (see Hareven, 1982; Modell, 1989; Mayer, 1986). Age and the life course provides a useful framework in which to think about the connections between people's lives and times, especially through the concept of birth cohort. Birth year places people in history and thereby locates them in relation to major historical forces. But a cohort perspective does not necessarily focus research questions and analysis on these forces. When the change process is not part of the investigator's research question, it is seldom directly measured and analyzed. Not surprisingly, research of this kind ends up without answers to change questions that were never asked. We take up this problem in the next section and expand upon a second lesson from contemporary work -- that our

understanding of social change in lives requires studies that actually explicate the effects of this change for life experiences and human development. Explanatory studies involve research that specifies the process by which social changes make a difference in lives.

Linking Social Change and Life Experience

The evolving field of life course studies brings two formerly segregated lines of inquiry together; the study of life-course development and the study of social change. But efforts to link between these domains are handicapped by perspectives that neglect the social institutions and ecologies of a changing society. One perspective based on the study of cohorts identifies broad categories of potential influences on life events which provide no clear understanding of effects and their explanatory mechanisms. The other approach views the social environment from the vantage point of the developing individual in context, and consequently fails to extract the full implications of a changing social system for the individual. It is one thing to place a child in the Great Depression and quite another to show how the massive economic collapse drastically altered the child's social environment.

Views of the environment from the behavior setting and organism are prominent concepts in life-span developmental psychology. In an exchange with two developmentalists on the "role of the social in life-span developmental psychology", Dale Dannefer (1984:847) correctly notes that the major question is whether the life-span model can incorporate "the range of social processes that organize the life courses of individuals and the collective life-course patterns of cohorts". Definitional statements regarding the centrality of the

social environment does not mean that "research will be designed, nor findings be interpreted, in a way that apprehends social structure as a constitutive force in development, and that views the social environment as more than a setting that facilitates maturational unfolding".

The life-span model falls well short of offering this mode of analysis and interpretation, but so do all models in modern psychology, including the ecology of human development (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979), No theory in psychology "apprehends social structure as a constitutive force in development" because the field generally views the social environment from the perspective of the individual organism. As Hetherington and Baltes (1988:9) point out, "child psychologists are likely to postulate a 'typical' course of ontogeny and to view non-normative and history-graded factors as modifiers, not as fundamental constituents, of development."

Individual-centered representations of the macro environment are common place in the social sciences even apart from developmental psychology. Consider, for example, Almond and Verba's classic study of the "civic culture" in five societies (1963). They focus on the qualities of the self-confident citizen who is likely to "follow politics, to discuss politics, to be a more active partisan" (pp. 206-207). The self-confident citizen not only thinks "he can participate, he thinks others ought to participate as well". Involvement in decision making within the family, school, and workplace, along with formal education, stand out as the primary developmental factors in the life histories of self-confident citizens. But what about the underlying historical forces and their influence on the political behavior of men and women in the United Kingdom, West Germany, Italy, Mexico, and the United States? With an age range of 40 years or more in each of the national

samples, the authors could have indexed exposure to major events and trends across the twentieth century -- two world wars, a world depression, post-1955 affluence, an increase in education and urban living -- and assessed their effects on socialization environments. Unfortunately, these forces were not studied and consequently nothing can be said about their relation to political self-confidence.

This individual perspective and a cohort approach generally pose research questions that lack an informed knowledge of the workings of society, social structure, and social change relative to their human implications. As such, they do not contribute to a theory of how social factors and systemic changes influence the life course. The full meaning of this assertion can be seen by taking a closer look at the two approaches, beginning with cohort studies.

Births Cohorts and their Life Patterns

If birth cohorts represent a link between social change and life patterns, what do they tell us about this connection? Consider the dramatic change in women's lives over the past fifty years in western societies (McLaughlin 1988). A systematic comparison of birth cohorts from the 1920s to the 1960s shows major cohort differences in women's education, gainful employment, and the timing of family events. But what do these differences mean? Any comparison of cohorts involves at least three potential effects: cohort, period, and age or time of measurement.

Cohort and period effects can be thought of as historical in nature. Historical influence takes the form of a cohort effect when social change differentiates the life trajectories of successive cohorts. Thus American

males who were born just before the 1930s were affected by Depression hardships more adversely than men who were 10 years older (Elder, 1979). History also takes the form of a period effect when the influence of a social change or event is relatively uniform across successive cohorts. Secular trends in the scheduling of marriages and first births across the twentieth century are largely an expression of period effects, especially from the late 1920s to the early 1950s. A third type of effect occurs through age and aging. Much has been written about the methodological challenge posed by estimating the three effects (Glenn, 1983), but another issue is more central to our concerns.

What does a significant cohort or period effect tell us about social change in life experience? Very little. Either type of effect identifies a domain of potential influences but cohort studies generally end by speculating about the prime influences. For example, studies of birth cohorts of American women since the Great Depression generally show an increasing pattern of life course diversity with trends toward later marriage, delayed childbearing coupled with births outside of marriage in the pre-adult years, more paid employment especially with young children, and higher rates of divorce (McLaughlin, 1988). But why are the trends occurring? What factors account for the trend toward higher labor force participation among young mothers or for the high level of divorce? Cohort studies typically speculate about such forces and fail to extend analysis to their actual investigation. At most we end up with a plausible story of how twentieth-century change is linked to women's lives. But stories do not advance scientific understanding. They do not weigh specific forces or explicate the causal process.

A more specific example of the limitations of cohort studies for linking social change and the life course comes from a study by Rindfuss, Morgan, and Swicegood (1984) on the first birth transition of white, native-born women in the United States. Using birth years from 1915 to 1939, the study observed a strong period effect across the cohorts; "period factors increase or decrease childbearing at all ages and for all subgroups within society" (p. 368). But researchers had no success in identifying the precise causal factors. Concerning the childbearing delay in the 1970s among educated women, they point to the plausible influence of the women's movement, rising interest rates, and soaring housing prices, but the data prevent any more conclusive statement. The range of potential influences under any "period" umbrella is so great that no conclusion can be drawn about specific effects. Period and cohort effects map categories of influence that are little more than a black box which invites speculation.

Some guidance as to the historical influence on cohort life patterns comes from the notion of historical settings as opportunity structures; the relative size, composition, and historical niche of a birth cohort have much to do with member access to life opportunities (Easterlin, 1978). Thus the large cohorts that reached maturity in the 1930s stand in contrast to the relative small birth cohorts that came of age in the prosperous 1950s. This contrast is dramatic in general outline, but remains inconclusive as to the processes involved. Likewise, we might agree with the observation that as each cohort encounters an historical event or change, whether depression or prosperity, it "is distinctively marked by the career stage it occupies" (Ryder, 1965, p. 846), but conclude that much is left unspecified by this mode of analysis. Having shown the type of historical imprint by cohort, a genuine

advance in understanding requires knowledge of how it occurred. What is the process by which successive birth cohorts are differentially influenced by particular historical forces?

Initially the concept of cohort seemed to offer a promising way of thinking about lives in a changing society, but the promise depends on originating research questions that link specific changes to the life course. These questions are rare. Even when history is substantively important, it may be operationalized as a period or cohort effect that provides no clue as to the precise nature of the influence. To estimate and explore this influence, an alternative research design is needed, one that begins with the properties of a particular social change and traces their effects to life experience. This approach also represents an alternative to perspectives on the social environment that are based on the individual, as shown below.

Representations of the Social and Historical

Historical developments between the 1930s and 1940s changed the nature of adolescence and thus the developmental experience of young Americans. Indeed, the difference between growing up in the depressed 1930s and in war-mobilized America of 1940-45 was literally a difference between two worlds of adolescence (Elder, 1980). The differences had much to do with the experiences of significant others, including parents, siblings, friends, and acquaintances. Hard times in the Great Depression influenced the lives of adolescents through the economic and job losses of parents, and also through its effects on the lives of grandparents who often moved in for a time. Among young people during World War II, the distinctive features of adolescence included the war-related employment of parents from sun-up to sun-down, the

military service and war trauma of older brothers, and the mobilization of school children for civil defense and the war effort. To understand these developments, we need an approach that begins with the transforming environment, not with the individual or a partial selection of social factors.

In Children of the Great Depression (Elder, 1974), three sets of linkages connected family hardship to the life experience of the Oakland Study members: labor intensive change in the family economy, changes in family relationships, and increasing levels of social strain. Each type of change identified relevant social and developmental outcomes for family members, and provided an explanation of them. For example, drastic income loss shifted the family economy toward more labor-intensive operations. These new modes of economic maintenance included the entry of mother and children into productive roles as earners; the greater involvement of children in household operations, the doubling up of family units; and a reduction in expenditures. Changes of this kind altered domestic and economic roles, shifting responsibilities to mother and the older children. As we moved to the adult years of the Oakland children, this household change acquired significance as an explanation for why women from hard pressed families were likely to value homemaking, family activity, and responsibility in the role of parent. Men from deprived families who played an economic role in their household were more likely than other men to establish a stable career line at an early point and to value industry and responsibility in their children.

The second link involved a series of relational changes under the pressure of family hardship. Father's loss of earnings and resulting adaptations in family support increased the relative power of mother, reduced the level and effectiveness of parental control, and diminished the

attractiveness of father as a model. Mother became a more central figure in the family on affection, authority, and the completion of basic tasks. More important, such family changes in response to income loss accelerated the social independence of males and enhanced the family dependence of girls. As a result, girls from deprived homes acquired strong preferences for a domestic way of life, an orientation in adulthood that they expressed on matters of family life, conjugal relations, and children.

Social strains in the family were magnified by heavy income loss and took the form of family discord, disorganization, and demoralization. Discord (tension, conflict, even violence) contributed to family disorganization, to the loss of control over member behavior, and to erratic, unpredictable actions, such as arbitrary punishment. Demoralization refers to the depressed state of family climate and member outlook. These conditions were especially prevalent in working-class families, and it is among their offspring that we find the only long-term adverse effects of hard times through worklife and health troubles. By comparison, family deprivation is linked to psychological health among men and women from the middle class.

With socioeconomic change as the point of departure for inquiry, this Depression study necessarily led to a variety of outcomes in the life course of the Oakland children, to pathways that resemble a branching tree. Knowledge of potential outcomes emerged from the immediate, proximal implications of a heavy income loss. In stepwise fashion these proximal changes provided insight into the mechanisms that linked hardship to children's lives.

A very similar analytic sequence appears in The Polish Peasant, although the content differs. For example, Thomas and Znaniecki show that emigration

and resettlement of Polish immigrants in urban centers of the new world initiated a breakdown of traditional lifeways and a period of family disorganization in which norms lost their effectiveness in regulating the behavior of members. These family changes, in turn, had consequences for individual behavior. Promiscuity and juvenile delinquency were common among the adolescent offspring of disorganized homes.

If our objective is to understand social change in lives, the most effective research strategy is to begin the inquiry by studying the particular environmental change and its human implications. This is what we have done in the Social Change Project. In our studies of Americans born before the 1930s, we find that their lives were shaped by the historical sequence of a Great Depression, a world war, and a few years of peace and prosperity, followed by the Korean conflict. Their children grew up in the Vietnam era, facing the perils and dilemmas of this age. To understand the imprint of changing times on the lives of these Americans, we chose to trace their effects through the primary worlds of family, work, and friends, since it is these environments that give specific meaning to new conditions. Five conceptual bridges between social change and lives emerged from this work, and provide a fitting conclusion to this section on linking times and lives.

Linking Mechanisms

Five conceptual mechanisms define our current thinking about the interaction between changing times and lives: control cycles, situational imperatives, the accentuation principle, the life stage distinction, and the concept of interdependent lives. The first three concepts refer to the correspondence between a changing environment and the life course. The life

stage notion indicates where the person is located within the life-span (older or younger) when major social change occurs, whereas the concept of interdependence locates all lives in relation to others who mediate the influence of social change.

1- Control cycles

As elaborated from Thomas's early writings on crisis situations, social change creates a disparity between claims and resources, goals and accomplishments, and the corresponding loss of control prompts efforts to regain control. The entire process resembles a control cycle. This cyclical process centers on the connection between losing control and efforts to restore control over life outcomes, a process documented by studies of reactance behavior.

Reactance feelings occur whenever one or more freedoms or expectations are eliminated or threatened. Such feelings motivate efforts to regain or preserve control. The Brehms (1982) refer to the substantial evidence for such motivation and note that "it is the threat to control (which one already had) that motivates an attempt to deal with the environment. And the attempts to deal with the environment can be characterized as attempts to regain control" (p. 375). Bandura (1987) stresses the motivating effects of setting higher goals, achieving them and setting even higher goals. The process entails the production and reduction of discrepancies, disequilibration, and equilibration.

Four phases mark the relation between social change and control cycles:

1. The disparity between claims and resources may occur through increasing claims, declining resources, or a discontinuity between acquired and needed resources.
2. The experience of losing control over one's life situation evolves from the preceding disparity; the greater the disparity, the greater the sense of loss.
3. Enhanced by a sense of personal efficacy (see Bandura, 1987), efforts to restore control involve adjusting claims, resources, or both in terms of their relation. Equilibrium is achieved when claims match resources. Once claims are realized, they may be raised, thereby setting in motion another round of equilibrating initiatives. Residential change or migration can be viewed effectively from this vantage point (Priemus, 1986; Wolpert, 1966).
4. Potential alteration or recasting of the life course occurs through new lines of adaptation and their consequences. Women's employment is one example for hard pressed families, and career switching for more earnings is another.

The precipitating event for this process is one that substantially alters the balance between claims and resources. As the balance changes, the actor's control potential is threatened, and adaptive responses are called into play. Adaptive responses, of course, depend on current conditions, the structured situation in history. Responses to historical transitions and the loss of personal control entail choices among given options, and this constraint illustrates how a social institution (e.g., the economy) might shape the life course.

2 - Situational Imperatives

One of the most important considerations in the dynamic of control cycles is the behavioral requirements or demands of the new situation. We refer to these demands as situational imperatives. In the 1930s, the imperatives of hard times for children were expressed in large part through households that became more labor intensive. Instead of the purchase of services and goods, family members had to produce more of these services and goods with their own labor. In this new world, young children had valued roles to play; they could contribute something to their family through an expanded range of chores and community tasks.

In many respects, deprived families resembled an undermanned environment in which the work to be done exceeded the available labor. Such conditions favored an accelerated pace of movement toward adult status, a pace responsive to the "downward extension of adult-like obligations" in Depression times (Elder, 1974). What are the behavioral implications of this kind of environment? Barker (1968, p. 190) found inhabitants of undermanned settings to be involved in more challenging and consequential actions when compared to the occupants of overmanned environments; they are "busier, more versatile, and more oriented vis-a-vis the settings they inhabit, and more independent".

Another example of situational imperatives comes from a program of research on work and personality (Kohn, 1977; Kohn and Schooler, 1983). This research shows that the behavioral imperatives of work shape how men and women think and function. The most powerful imperative is occupational self-direction; the greater the self-direction, the more workers deal with substantively complex, nonroutinized tasks that entail minimal supervision.

Job conditions that encourage self-direction are conducive to effective intellectual functioning and an open, flexible approach to others.

Both worker and situation must be part of a model in order to account for how aspects of the work setting and organization are linked to the personality of workers. Consider, for example, the degree of control a person exercises over the work process. In Kohn and Schooler's research, self-directed men seek control over their work, and such control reinforces a self-directed orientation. When this match fails to occur, the mismatch sets in motion a control cycle dynamic like that described earlier.

3- The Accentuation Principle

Adaptive responses are shaped by the requirements of the new situation, but they also depend on the social and psychological resources people bring to the newly changed situation. Individual and relational attributes, such as coping styles and the marital bond, affect adaptation to new circumstances. The accentuation principle refers to the increase in emphasis or salience of these already prominent characteristics during social transitions in the life course.

One of the earliest documented cases of accentuation comes from the pioneering research of Newcomb on women students of newly established Bennington College in rural Vermont, late 1930s (Newcomb, 1943). In the liberal environment of Bennington, entering students who were relatively independent of parental influences tended to shift their social and political attitudes more toward the college norm than other students.

Over 30 years later, Newcomb returned to this problem of personal change in a survey of the college student literature. With Feldman (1969), he

concluded that the distinguishing attributes of entering college students were likely to be "reinforced and extended by the experience incurred in those selected settings." Though Newcomb's emphasis changed from a shift in attitudes to the reinforcement of initial views, both studies show the accentuation of dispositions through the interaction of life history and the demands of the new situation.

A similar account comes from Allport, Bruner, and Jandorf (1941) in a neglected study of personality under social catastrophe. Analyzing personal documents reporting the experiences of 90 individuals during the Nazi revolution, they argued that "very rarely does catastrophic...change produce catastrophic alterations in personality." On the contrary, the basic structure of personality persists despite the upset and upheaval in the total life space. Moreover, where change does take place, "it seems invariable to accentuate trends clearly present in the pre-crisis personality."

Transitions, historical and contemporary, frequently entail accentuation processes. A contemporary example appears in the literature on the transition of white and black children to the first grade. In a longitudinal sample of Baltimore children, Entwisle and Alexander (1988) document the unusual vulnerability of lower status black children to a downward academic spiral across this transition. In the higher-status group, black children did at least as well as white children in their school performance through first and second grade. However, the racial gap expanded markedly across this time period for the less advantaged children.

Black children did not do as well even though "the personal resources they brought with them -- beginning test-scores, personal maturity level, and their home backgrounds, look similar to those of the white children." In an

effort to explain this accentuation of the failure risk for disadvantaged black children, Entwisle and Alexander conclude that the primary influences appear to be more integral to the school environment than to the family. Teacher grading proved to be more negative for black than for white children, even though the children's original test scores were not different. More generally, they found that the evaluative contexts of school were much less supportive of black than of white children.

The accentuation of individual differences by historical transitions applies especially to stressful times. In the Great Depression, for example, severe economic hardship tended to make irritable and explosive men more explosive (Elder, Caspi, & Van Nguyen, 1986; Liker & Elder, 1983). This behavior undermined the quality of marriages and increased the arbitrary and punitive character of parental discipline. Corresponding outcomes on accentuation are reported by Patterson (1988) in samples of mothers and their children. On the other side of the equation are resources that moderate the adverse effects of family stress, such as nurturant marital relations and kin support. As we shall see later in this chapter, the selective accentuation of individual dispositions at points of stressful social transitions represents a powerful source of a well documented trend by age, that of increasing cohort heterogeneity up to old age.

4 - The Life Stage Principle

A related principle derives from cohort research and addresses the life-stage principle: The influence of a historical event on the life course depends on the stage at which individuals experience the event. The life-stage principle offers a perspective on families and children that locates

them within the life course and its age-graded tasks and experiences. It implies that the effects of social change should vary in type and relative influence across the life course and alerts the investigator to the complexity of interactions among historical, social, psychological, and biological factors.

Consider two families in 1930: Family A has two children born around 1920, and Family B has two children born in 1928 to 1930. On the basis of the life stage principle, we would expect the meaning and significance of Depression hardship to vary significantly between the two sets of children. The older children were 9 to 16 years old during the height of the Depression, too young to leave school and face a dismal employment situation and too old to be highly dependent on the family. By comparison, the younger children were 1 to 8 years old, ages when they were most dependent on their families in the midst of the economic crisis and thus at greatest risk of impaired development and life opportunities.

This contrast is actually represented by our comparison of two birth cohorts of Americans who grew up during the Great Depression; the Oakland Growth sample (birthdates of 1921-22) and the Berkeley Guidance sample (birthdates of 1928-29). The 167 men and women of the Oakland cohort were children during the prosperous 1920s, a time of unparalleled economic growth in California. Thus they entered the Depression after a relatively secure phase of early development. Later, they avoided the scars of joblessness after high school by virtue of wartime mobilization. By contrast, the 214 members of the Berkeley cohort entered hard times in the vulnerable years of early childhood and experienced the pressures of adolescence during the unsettled though prosperous years of World War II.

Members of the Oakland cohort were beyond the critical early stage of development and dependency when the Great Depression hit; they left high school in the late 1930s during economic recovery and the initial phase of wartime mobilization. Unlike the younger Berkeley children, they were old enough to play important roles in the household economy and to confront future prospects within the context of Depression realities. Family hardship came early in the lives of the Berkeley children and often became a prolonged deprivation experience. The causal link between economic deprivation in the 1930s and adolescent behavior included a pattern of socioeconomic instability, with its distorting influence on family life -- the emotional strain of resource exhaustion, loss of an effective, nurturant father, and marital discord. Not surprisingly, the enduring adverse effects of Depression hardship turned out to be concentrated in the lives of the Berkeley boys, both in adolescence and in the middle years. No such effects were observed in the lives of the Oakland men (Elder, 1979).

Within the same family or household, siblings occupy different life stages at a point in history, no matter how small the variation may be, and differences of this kind are coupled with historical variation as well. In the past we thought of the chronology of siblings in terms of birth-order effects within the family. Now we recognize that children separated by a few years may grow up in very different times. Siblings only 5 years apart in 1940 were as different in history as the difference between combat experience on the island in Bougainville in the South Pacific and a class party at Berkeley High School.

Diverse life histories become the interweave of family and ties, softening the edges of cohort uniqueness. Through interdependent lives, the

family serves as a meeting ground for members of different cohorts (Hagestad, 1982). With each person's actions a part of the social context of other members, any change in a member's life constitutes a change in the lives and context of other members.

5- Interdependent Lives

The concept of interdependent lives represents a central theme of family systems theories (Minuchin, 1985) and the life course approach. Systems approaches assume that the family is a social group, and its functioning as a whole is different from the sum of its parts. This arises because the properties of the family as a whole are derived from the properties of the relationships between individuals in the family and not just from the characteristics of the individuals as separate persons.

The expansion of analytic models form a dyadic unit (e.g., mother-child) to a family system (e.g., mother-father-child) provides knowledge of how interactions between two people influence and are influenced by a third person. The response of each person to the other is conditioned by his or her joining relationship to a third person. Thus changes within any individual or relationship may affect all other persons and relationships.

Empirical examples of these social complexities come from our research on the Berkeley Guidance sample of males and females who were born in 1928-29 (Elder, Liker, and Cross, 1984; Elder, Caspi, and Downey, 1986). The cohort includes approximately 214 children during the 1930s, both middle and working class who were born in the city of Berkeley. Families that suffered heavy income losses became more discordant in the marital relationship, owing largely to rising financial disputes and the more irritable, tense, and

volatile state of men. The latter change represented a primary determinant of the abusive parenting behavior of men. The more irritable men became under economic pressure, the more they tended to behave punitively and arbitrarily toward their offspring. Finally, economic stress generally accentuated the explosive tendency of men, but it did so primarily when they ranked initially high on this characteristic. Yet even when irritable under economic stress, fathers' abusive treatment of children was least likely if mother provided affectional support for the child. This maternal role minimized also a continuation of the child's problem behavior.

The transmission of abusive behavior and its behavioral effects across the generations serves as another example of lives lived interdependently. Two aspects of this process are ordinarily studied in isolation. Multi-generation studies typically focus on the behavioral transmission process from parent to child, whereas life-span studies follow behavior patterns in childhood up to the adult years. Both lines of analysis are complementary and we have brought them together in a study of the proposition that unstable personalities (explosive, volatile) and unstable family relations (marital, parent-child) are mutually reinforcing dynamics across the life course (Elder, Caspi, and Downey, 1986). They persist from one generation to the next through a process of individual continuity and intergenerational transmission.

The four generations in this research come from the Berkeley Guidance archive: grandparents (G1), parents (G2), Study children (G3), and great grandchildren (G4). All of the data on the grandparents were reported by the parents in 1929-30. The parents in this analysis were linked to their own parents (G1) and to their children (G3) during the Great Depression. The Study children were followed from childhood to their own parental years, and

then to their own children. Overall, the intergenerational continuity of unstable problem behavior was most pronounced among the Berkeley females, and unstable family relationships played an important role in this persistence. Within all generations, the causal influence flowed from unstable personalities to unstable family relations. The association of hostility and discord linked unstable personalities in one generation to such personalities in the next generation.

* * *

Control cycles, situational imperatives, processes of accentuation, life stage distinctions, and interdependent lives together provide an account of linkages between social change and life patterns. In the Social Change Project, this connection occurs through individuals, social relationships, and their interplay over time in situations with varying requirements. The dynamic evolves through families, a meeting ground for interdependent lives, and through other primary environments such as friendships. From this vantage point, the interaction between historical time and lifetime is a function of changes in the life course of all family members.

Each of these types of linking mechanisms may be thought of as overlapping regions of different conceptual systems, such as the individual and family environment, the family unit and neighborhood, and the neighborhood in relation to a particular community and its social institutions (Elder, 1973). In relation to our study of lifetime influences from the Great Depression, "linkages provide answers to the question of why economic change has particular effects; they offer an interpretation of the relationship, an account of the process or mechanisms through which social change influences

personality and behavior" (Elder, 1974, p. 13). To illustrate this process, consider the relation between family hardship in the 30s and the marital orientation of daughters, an example that adds greater detail to the global mechanisms we have discussed, such as interdependent lives. In theory,

> "economic deprivation fosters a relatively early interest in marriage among girls through interpersonal strains in the family and domestic socialization. Two questions are posed by this analytic mode; does family deprivation have such an effect on marital orientation, and is it mediated by the specified intervening variables? Another question concerns the relative importance of the two proposed linkages; does economic deprivation affect marital interest mainly through family strains or through domestic influences in the household? To identify the particular relevance of these global constructs for orientation to marriage, we convert each to more specific and concrete manifestations. Family strain is thus phrased as marital conflict and emotional estrangement from father; domestic socialization as mother's centrality in the family, the daughter's role in the household, and lack of parental support for the daughter's higher education."
>
> (Elder, 1974, p. 13)

The five linking mechanisms refer to the connection between social change and life course, but they are also useful in thinking about the social life course and its implications for development and aging. The control cycle dynamic is set in motion as people move across life transitions from early childhood to later life. Each transition, even those embedded in the normative system of expectations (such as marriage and the first birth),

entails some loss which initiates efforts to regain it. At the birth of the first child, assistance by the new mother's own mother can be viewed in terms of this equilibration process. All new situations have their own behavioral imperatives and may entail stressors that accentuate personal dispositions, such as compliance with authority in hierarchical work settings. The life stage principle alerts us to the age status and social roles people occupy when they enter new transitions. A case in point is the large difference in age among women who have a first child. Finally, the notion of interdependent lives underscores the social matrix in which lives are lived, a dynamic highlighted by the family life cycle of generational succession.

Age, Generations, and the Life Course: A Concluding Note on the Chicago Tradition

The life course perspective in this essay owes much to the Chicago tradition of orienting concepts and research, from work careers to historical sensitivity and a concern for the nature of a changing society. However, this tradition has little to do with a major wellspring of life course ideas, that of age and its diverse meanings -- social, historical, and biological. As a developmentalist, Bernice Neugarten represents the major exception through her examination of the sociology and social psychology of age variations in lives. She observed a

> "prescriptive time-table for the ordering of major life events: a time in the life span when men and women are expected to marry, a time to raise children, a time to retire . . . Men and women are aware not only of the social clocks that operate in various areas of their lives, but they are aware also of their own timing and

readily describe themselves as 'early,' 'late,' or 'on time' with regard to family and occupational events."

(Neugarten, 1968: 23-24)

Neugartan's contribution entered the picture rather late in the postwar era of Chicago social science, well after the end of the early Chicago school, but its timing coincided with the vigorous growth of a demography of age, as expressed in the work of Norman Ryder (1965). Both developments gave age variation new significance in the study of lives.

The neglect of age is vividly expressed in The Polish Peasant despite its pioneering effort to study historical experience in lives. A perspective based on kinship and the generations informs the study, not one based on birth cohorts and age-grading. The sequence of generations, from grandparent to child, are only loosely placed in historical time and context. Indeed, we know that the age range for members of a generation may exceed 30 years. Consequently, people of similar generational position can differ markedly in age. Conversely, people of the same age may belong to different generations. This temporal imprecision tends to place people in a timeless realm. From the standpoint of the life course itself, The Polish Peasant does not locate people according to their life stage or age at emigration. Moreover, it does not portray family units and members across stages of the life course and analyze their differential response to the experience of mass emigration from Europe to large cities in the United States. No reference is made to the family cycle as stages of parenthood and their relation to economic well-being and options.

This early research on lives from a generational perspective has contemporary proponents, most notably among colleagues and former students of

Bernice Neugarten. But it has also been combined with age perspectives in an approach to the life course. When Gunhild Hagestad (1990) joined the Chicago faculty in human development during the early 1970s, she became a collaborator of Neugarten on a study of three generations in the Chicago region. This research led her to think about how changes in generational position alter or restructure the life course. She noted that greater distance occurs between parents and offspring when the former move to the last position in a lineal sequence. The death of grandparents and parents entails significant role and identity losses.

An even clearer example of the convergence of age and generational distinctions in life course studies comes from the work of Vern Bengtson, a former student of Neugarten and his own student, Linda Burton. The study of the interlocking transitions of family members with data on female lineages in a black community of Los Angeles (Burton and Bengtson, 1985). An early birth to the teenage daughter of a young mother created a large disparity between age and kinship status, between being young in age and facing the prospects of grandparental obligations. Four out of five mothers of young mothers actually refused to accept their new obligations as grandmothers. Their refusal shifted the grandmother burden of childcare up the generational ladder to the great-grandmother who in many cases was carrying a heavy load. By comparison, the women who became grandmothers in their 40s or so were eager for the new role. In this lineage, a timely transition to motherhood by the daughter meant a timely transition to grandmotherhood by her own mother.

In different times and ways, studies within the Chicago tradition have played a formative role in the evolution of a life course perspective. This essay highlights W.I. Thomas's contributions during the first era of life

course study and the subsequent influence of career studies, age grading, and the combined influence of age and kinship in patterning lives. Historical sensitivity has generally distinguished major works in the Chicago tradition, and the growth of cohort studies in the 1960s provided a way to think about linkages between times and lives. By the mid-1970s, the dual theme of life history and social history had become a distinctive feature of the life course. As noted by our proposed set of linking mechanisms, the major challenge today is to explicate the relation between historical change and lives.

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