

Glen Elder Professional Narrative

Introduction

The central problem of my scientific career relates human development to the life course in changing environments, with emphasis on educational processes or linkages, e.g., socialization and mastery learning. When I initiated this program of work in the 1960s, the study of human development across the life span called for fresh thinking about how individual lives are socially patterned over time, and about the processes by which lives are changed by changing environments. Life course theory, as we know it today, emerged in response to such issues and related studies. To some observers (Colby, 1998, p. viii), this theoretical development represents "one of the most important achievements of social science in the second half of the 20th century." I have contributed to this development with theoretical and empirical work, beginning with *Children of the Great Depression* (Elder, 1974, 1999).

This overview includes:

1. a biographical account of my career (involving three university faculties — University of California at Berkeley (1962–1967), Cornell University (1979–1984), and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1968–1977, 1984–present) as it relates to the study of educative processes in human development and the development of life course theory; and
2. a schematic review of work along this line, all based on longitudinal data archives.

A Professional Narrative

Research questions and insights typically evolve from the life experiences of investigators in the social and behavioral sciences. My early experiences in Cleveland during World War II and a subsequent transition to rural farm living in Pennsylvania personalized the human impact of social change and eventually led to a postgraduate specialization in sociology and psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Ph.D., 1961). Both graduate studies and a subsequent postdoctoral fellowship (NIMH) emphasized contextual influences, life histories, and the concrete problems of a changing society. These issues are elements of the early Chicago School of Sociology, as carried forward in the work of my professional mentors — Charles Bowerman, John A. Clausen.

During graduate studies at the University of North Carolina, the study of socialization tended to slight the role of father, the development of parents as well as children, the reciprocal nature of social interaction (that children influence parents and vice versa), and the educative dimensions of family influences (explanatory interaction, etc.). These biases reflect a preoccupation with the early years of development, and have been challenged most effectively by life course theories. My dissertation on family structure and socialization, using a large survey, addressed some of these biases by focusing on the educative dimensions of reciprocal relationships between adolescents and parents. Other biases were challenged by longitudinal research linking childhood and the middle years. This work began with my first appointment (1962) at the University of California, Berkeley, as an assistant professor of sociology. I also had a research appointment with John Clausen, a distinguished sociologist and director of the Institute of Human Development on the campus.

The University of California exposed me to longitudinal studies for the first time, to studies that follow individuals over many years of their lives. The Institute of Human Development was home to pioneering longitudinal studies of Californians who were born in the 1920s. I had been trained to work with cross-sectional surveys in graduate school and hence found myself confronted with a very new challenge — the task of coding the uncoded data in data archives at the Institute. Instead of very little information on some 9,000 cases at a point in time, I had to deal with many waves of data on 400 people over 30 years of their life. Coding requires a model of the phenomenon being coded, and thus my assignment led me to think about how lives are socially organized and how they change. Role theory and its approach to socialization provided one approach to this task, but it failed to capture the temporal dimension of lives — that social roles are entered and exited at different times by people. Role theory with its life cycle model also failed to locate people in historical time and place.

My efforts to fashion an approach to the study of human lives were reinforced by discoveries in the data archives. As I worked with records on individual families, I became aware of the stunning amount of change, from day to day, week to week, and month to month. Traditional ways of thinking about a family's socioeconomic status could not be applied to these families. This realization eventually produced a plan to measure the economic change families experienced in the Great Depression and investigate its affects on family processes and the developmental course of children. In studying change one begins to think about time, temporality, and age. The chronology of lives is marked by age-grading and birth year locates people in historical time. In putting together a way of thinking about "children of the Great Depression," I drew upon traditional relational distinctions of role theory and the rich meanings of age in developing a contextual approach to the life course of human development.

The integration of these two formerly isolated theoretical traditions (role and age-based theories) is distinctive of *Children of the Great Depression*, 1974. Role theory provided a "timeless" view of lives and the generations, as well as an understanding of interdependent lives. Theories of age brought timing, context, and agency to the study of lives and socialization across the life course. I mention these points in some detail because the key paradigmatic principles of life course theory are expressed in this work; and they have shaped the course of my work.

The Berkeley years shifted my career and work from socialization at a point in time to the life course in a changing society. Socialization became part of a larger framework that placed human development and lives in historical and geographic contexts. Educational influences were an important part of this framework as social change, a mechanism by which lives are changed, and a component of individual competence and agency. When I was invited back to UNC-Chapel Hill on the sociology faculty (1967), the analysis for *Children of the Great Depression* was well underway. As so often happens, the project raised new questions and challenges that continue to influence my career.

Such questions produced a new research agenda for me; in particular, the need to investigate a comparative birth cohort (the Berkeley Study members, born 1928–1929, vs. the Oakland Study members in the book); and to assess the lifelong impact of the Second World War and the Korean War. This impact was largely unknown at the time, such as the educational benefits of the GI Bill. Preparation of archival materials for the Berkeley Study was carried out with a small research team

during a sabbatical year (1972–1973) at the Institute of Human Development, Berkeley. This preparation extended beyond the Berkeley Study members to their parents over many years and their children as well. Though not realized at the time, the Berkeley parents, as members of the 1900 generation, would become an ongoing project over the next four decades, known as “Families in Depression and War: The 1900 Generation.”

In the 1970s at UNC-Chapel Hill, I placed Children of the Great Depression in historical context through a series of comparative cohort studies (comparing the Oakland cohort born in 1920–1921 with the Berkeley study members born in 1928–1929). This work also initiated a program of work that assessed the life-course effects of military service during World War II and the Korean War. Later on I turned to the Stanford-Terman study to address such matters. Collectively, these studies changed the original question that I posed on "children of the 1930s," one that stressed hardship and its continuing effects on lives. Access to higher education, entry into a stable marriage, and educational opportunities through military service enabled a large percentage of the disadvantaged males and women from the 1920s to rise above their family limitations. These experiences focused my attention on the "process of resilience" instead of on risk and vulnerability. The new question asked how disadvantaged youth managed to exceed expectations based on their social origins.

By the end of the 1970s, life course studies had become an exciting new field of study. I was asked to join the "life course and human development" committee of the Social Science Research Council and co-chaired it over the committee's last seven years in the 1980s. The new director of a proposed Boys Town Research Center on Families and Children invited me to contribute to the center by bringing my research team to Omaha for several years (I accepted). As my work and theoretical interests became more interdisciplinary, I developed close ties to a well-known developmental psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner at Cornell University. At the end of the 1970s, I joined his human development program and gained immensely from the cross-disciplinary learning it provided. A Guggenheim fellowship in the early 1980s enabled me to expand this learning by directing a longitudinal workshop for junior faculty members (sponsored by the SSRC Committee) that eventually produced an influential volume, *Life Course Dynamics* (1985). Productive collaboration with psychologists and historians, faculty and students, represents a common theme across this period.

The next phase of my career, began with a return to the University of North Carolina (1984) as the Howard W. Odum Professor of Sociology. This period is distinguished by research initiatives that applied life course theory to a range of challenging studies: (1) rural disadvantage in the lives of midwestern youth, parents, and the older generation; (2) inner-city poverty in the lives of Philadelphia children and young people; and (3) the impact of the Cultural Revolution on the lives of Chinese, from youth to middle age. The first longitudinal study is based on three generations from north central Iowa and extends from 1988 to the year 2003 with NIMH funding; and the second project draws upon a survey of adolescents and parents in Philadelphia, supplemented by in depth qualitative interviews and observations. This work was facilitated in many important ways by my senior Research Scientist Award from NIMH in 1985 and by my involvement in the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Adolescent Development among Youth in High Risk Settings (1988 -1997). The NIMH award continued up to 2000, followed by a Senior Scholar award to 2010 from the Spencer Foundation.

When I began graduate work, the life course was not a concept, theory, or field of instruction. Today, life course ideas are everywhere in the social and behavioral sciences. I have been privileged to have played a role in this intellectual movement. In my presidential address to the 1997 Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development in Washington, D.C. I proposed the "life course perspective as developmental theory." At the very least, the social life course should inform developmental theory because it brings the individual's changing environment into the model across the life span. I think of this as the heart of my contributions to developmental science, and I turn now to a brief review of such work.

Research Background

Models of behavioral continuity shaped expectations of lives when I launched my first longitudinal studies in the 1960s. These expectations clashed with the empirical realities of "lives through time" as I followed Americans who were born in the 20s through the 30s and 40s and into the 60s. Instead of reproducing "hard times" in the adult years, most of these Depression children managed to surmount life's disadvantages. They followed a resilient life course. Both continuity and change became elements of their life course.

This way of thinking about human development extends across most of the research I have done since the 1960s. In addition, I discovered that "the transition to adulthood" revealed key insights about behavioral continuity and change from the dependency years of development to the middle years and late life. This transition became a valuable window, among others, for observing both halves of the life course. All of the core principles of life course theory have special application to this transition — lifelong development and aging, the role of human agency in making life choices, the constraints and opportunities of the historical time and place, the timing of events and transitions, and the forming and dissolution of linked lives.

My research plan on the transition to adulthood builds upon a series of studies that date back to the 60s. Using longitudinal data (Oakland Growth Study — N=167) at the Institute of Human Development, UC Berkeley, my first study investigated the impact of drastic income loss during the early 30s on the lives of Californians who were born in 1920–21 and grew up in Oakland (Elder, 1974, 1999). To explain the resilient lives of so many of these young people, I turned to a comparative birth cohort at the Institute of Human Development — a cohort of Berkeley residents who were born in 1928–29 and became members of the Guidance Study (Elder, 1979 — N=214). The Berkeley children were more dependent on their family when hardship occurred and consequently we expected them to be more vulnerable to the disruption and stresses of the 30s. These expectations were supported by a series of empirical studies, but this work also revealed a striking pattern of resilience in the lives of the younger Berkeley cohort.

In both cohorts, the findings directed attention to explanations for resilient trajectories. What factors favored a trajectory of resilience? Three transitions defined plausible turning points out of disadvantage — entry into higher education, a stable, quality marriage, and entry into the military with its value for expanding personal knowledge, vocational skills, and self-confidence. Most of the males in the two cohorts were mobilized into the armed forces, either during World War II or during the postwar era, including the Korean conflict. Military service became the key transition because it frequently enhanced the education of men and led to stable marriages. In the lives of women, both education and marriage played an important role in their escape from disadvantage.

Early entry into military service among men favored use of the GI Bill and led to an accelerated course of worklife achievement. Depending on individual differences, such as ego resilience, even men who experienced combat tended to show developmental gains on self-confidence and social competence by the middle years, when compared to nonveterans (Elder, 1986, 1987; Elder & Clipp, 1989). However, studies of the Stanford-Terman men also revealed the high costs of late mobilization — after the age of 31 (Elder, Shanahan, & Clipp, 1997), as expressed in life disruption and poor health. Late entrants experienced a much higher divorce rate, when compared to other men. Life stage, as the timing of life, made an important difference for men in the military service (Dechter & Elder, 2004).

These studies focused on urban children and their settings. To broaden the scope of this research, I turned to contemporary disadvantage in both rural and urban America. In the midst of the Great Farm Crisis of the 1980s, I joined an Iowa State research team to launch the Iowa Youth and Families Project as a panel study of the effects of economic changes underway in the state. Observational and survey data were obtained from some 451 parents, a target child (7th grade in 1989), and a near sibling. Patterned after *Children of the Great Depression* (1974), the study viewed the family, its strains, relationships, and adaptations as a set of linkages between socioeconomic decline across the region and its effects on children and adults (Conger & Elder, 1994). The second part of this study focused on "pathways out of rural disadvantage," with emphasis on the social resources of families that had ties to the land. A recently published book, entitled *Children of the Land: Adversity and Success in Rural America* (Elder & Conger, 2002) investigates the pathways these families established for their children amidst economic decline. The Iowa project began in 1989 and is now following the children into their 30s as well as their own children.

The urban counterpart of this contemporary research investigated the lives of nearly 500 African-American and white youth from the inner city neighborhoods of Philadelphia (Furstenberg, Cooke, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). The central question is how parents manage their children's upbringing in order to minimize the dangers and maximize access to opportunities. The neighborhoods range in poverty from 10 to over 40 percent. They also vary on rates of delinquency, crime, and drug addiction. Data come from 1991 interviews with mother or caregiver and adolescent (ages 11–14), along with questionnaires. Older near-sibs were also interviewed. These data were supplemented by ethnographic studies in particular neighborhoods. In contrast to traditional socialization studies based on interaction within the household, this project assessed parenting both within and outside of the household. A second wave of data on the Study members focuses on pathways to adulthood.

Longitudinal studies of the young adult transition have tended to focus on individuals, but the Iowa, Philadelphia, and a new initiative (using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health — known as "Add Health") have enabled us to move beyond this limitation by viewing the lives of young people as interdependent with those of other people who have become important to them, from the immediate household to the extended family, school personnel and friends. The Add Health study began with an in-school wave of nearly 100,000 adolescents, from grade 7 to 12. Two additional in-home surveys were carried out in 1995 and 1996 with a maximum of 20,000 adolescents from the in-school survey. In 2002 the students were followed up with a survey of their life course and health at ages 18 to 26. A 2007 follow-up is planned, with a focus

on health in the young adult years. This is a uniquely valuable national study with contextual richness, based on data concerning neighborhood of residence, school and institution of higher learning, peer networks and friendships (same and opposite sex), and race/ethnic variation. The sample also includes a large subsample of siblings.

The role of teachers and other mentors in the young adult transition has much to do with their institutional context, whether school, neighborhood or the larger community. For example, in our work with the Add Health sample, we find that intergenerational bonds in school are related to the attributes of the school setting in which they occurred. Student-teacher relationships were more positive in private schools where students felt secure. Stronger intragenerational ties (e.g. among students) were observed in schools that possessed some of the same attributes — they were private rather than public, offered greater racial/ethnic matching between students, and provided a greater sense of personal safety. In all schools, students who felt connected to teachers and students were most likely to be successful in their academic work. Resilience and vulnerability continue to be themes in our research as we identify pathways out of disadvantage and risk. The next wave of Add Health has emphasized a life course model that integrates biology and social-psychological factors in contextual studies of health across the young adult years.

This research has extended to other cultures as well with an eye to strategic comparative studies. In 1987, I collaborated with a Japanese colleague, Yoriko Meguro, to investigate the life-course effects of military service. A year later I joined Chinese collaborators to launch an interview study of 1300 residents of Shanghai for the purpose of using retrospective life history methods to assess the impact of the Cultural Revolution on the life course (Elder, Wu, & Jihui, 1993). Other collaborative research includes my role as one of the research advisors to a comparative study of youth in the Great Recession -- the USA, United Kingdom, and Germany.

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