

Handbook of the Life Course: Volume II

edited by Michael J. Shanahan, Jeylin T. Mortimer, and Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson

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By its very title, *Handbook of the Life Course: Volume II*, edited by three esteemed American life course scholars, shows how far life course perspectives (it must be plural) and research have come. Two volumes are needed to adequately cover the material. The editors assure readers in the opening paragraphs of this large book that it is not an update of Volume I of the *Handbook*, published in 2003, but a second volume which identifies new and emerging concepts, methods, and research and analytical strategies. They then clarify by adding that the two volumes indeed connect, but that the Volume II remit is more on issues of the future.

This title is part of Springer's Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research series. A doorstopper of a book at over 700 pages, it is divided neatly into five sections of approximately equal length: Foundations of life course studies and future research; Changing social contexts and life course patterns; Health and development through the life course; Life course research methodologies; and lastly, The life course and policy: Building the nexus.

Bynner's lead chapter outlines how life course studies emerged out of an interest in interdisciplinary understanding of human development. The approach—or, more properly, approaches—grew along with longitudinal data sources, with broadening foci on multiple life course domains. Childhood studies were initially the purview of life course studies, and then the focus changed to particular life stages such as adolescence, adulthood, and old age, generally analysed as separate. Early studies, according to Bynner, were hampered by attention to data collection and management, and thus on "...inadequately thought out scientific programs lacking hypotheses" (p. 28). For the most part, there was a neglect of analyses that extended across the whole of the life course, with some notable exceptions. Many early life course studies were regional, small studies with particular foci. Some, however, such as the Framingham study of heart disease, started in 1947, have resulted in significant insights and are still collecting data. Over time, countries and consortia of countries took initiatives to develop longitudinal data surveys, propelling life course studies substantially forward. Canada is mentioned as starting the Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth in 1994–95 (now discontinued), as well as being the first country to undertake a longitudinal survey of immigrants (also now discontinued). With many longitudinal surveys available across countries, the foundations of growth in life course studies, according to Bynner, is built. He provides a helpful multi-page table summarizing the many surveys by country, including when they started, what the samples are, and what follow-up ages are included in each. This table could save life course researchers time in searching for data.

The section on foundations of the life course continues with three thoughtful essays, by Elder and George, Dannefer et al., and Mortimer and Moen. In sum, these essays encourage future life course research to focus on how birth cohorts create social change, as well as on joining cohort with spatial data (Elder and George), moving into social contexts beyond the "free-floating" individual (Dannefer et al.), and how age phases of life courses

have become increasingly differentiated. This section closes with a provocative essay by Hagestad and Dykstra, contrasting American and European life course studies; the latter focus more on macro-level issues, while the former focus on the micro.

The section on changing social contexts of the life course is perhaps the most engaging for sociology and population researchers. Here, there are eight chapters, on family heterogeneity, educational pathways, new institutional conflicts for young adults, cross-national changes in educational inequality, gendered life courses, military service and criminal justice (both particular U.S. issues, as the editors note in their introduction), and disasters. The chapters together offer rich insights on what we know about the life course in rapidly changing social domains, and what is yet needed to be known. For example, it is understood that family life disruptions, at least in the U.S., are more likely among lower-income, less-educated families (Hofferth and Goldscheider). Much more research is needed about the consequences and, perhaps, interactions of cumulative exposures to different family types and the historical/biographical intersections at which these transitions occur. A 22-country comparative study (Blossfeld et al.) of educational inequality asks who benefits most from educational expansion and how intergenerational transmission of parents' education conveys advantages or disadvantages. Disasters are particularly to be noted (DeWaard), given their potential to dramatically alter human life courses, yet little research has been done so far on life courses and disasters. So much more is yet to be known.

Section III addresses health and human development, with seven chapters on early childhood poverty effects on health, adult health and social change, education and health, aging, and mental health. This, too, is a section of immense interest to demographers and sociologists. The 'long arm of childhood' is explored by Hayward and Sheehan, for example, revealing that not all childhood experiences are reflected in adult health, but they can be nuanced by ethnicity and timing, to name just two factors. These authors emphasize that the social precursors to health need to be examined with attention to cohort differences. Avison outlines the fruitful intellectual cross-fertilization of sociology of mental health with life course research, which since about 2000 has included insights into the longitudinal patterns of stressors, and the complex connections of stress over time to mental health. He urges continued study of the 'stress universe' as well as exploration of possible turning points that might redirect mental health trajectories. This is rich material indeed.

Section IV moves into the more practical, with attention to life course methods. This section of five chapters is hardly dull or dusty. Instead, consistent with the mandate of this volume, it introduces emerging and exciting approaches to doing life course research. Some might find it surprising, after all the discussion earlier in the volume about longitudinal data development, to find the opening chapter in the methods section to be on qualitative life course research. Hermanowicz has done long-term interview-based research on scientific careers. He shows that this methodology is well suited to understanding between and within cohort processes as well as social processes related to age. The challenge, of course, is that researchers must start this kind of project when they are very young. Other chapters on methods focus on the capacities of growth curve models (Macmillan and Furstenberg), on multi-generational research approaches (Thornberry), and on socio-spatial research (Browning et al.).

The last section of the *Handbook* looks at life course and policy as a fruitful nexus with six chapters. Bynner opened the first chapter in the book with an invocation of public relevance for life course research, given the significant investment that countries and research agencies have made in data collection. The authors in this section make the case of relevance for criminology, for disease trajectories, for social welfare policies and the understanding of risk, and for young lives in less-developed countries. Bynner's invocation is being heeded. In the last chapter, O'Rand and Bostic make the compelling point that life course studies should be placed front and centre in the context of global change. They propose dispensing with seeing life course in terms of age-gradation to seeing it in its huge complexity of the biological, social, and cognitive all occurring in the context of rapid global change and shifting inequalities, from birth to death. Thus, the life course becomes a "manifold cumulative phenomenon."

Handbook of the Life Course: Volume II could usefully sit on any life course researcher's desk—not on a shelf, because it is too useful. Each chapter offers rich and new insights into the adventure of life courses and life course research. It is not a book for undergraduates, but graduate students and researchers at all levels could beneficially dip into the book again and again for inspiration and guidance.

If there is a weakness in this edited volume, it is its predilection for American research in both focus and choice of chapter authors, though the first substantive chapter and the penultimate chapter are authored by non-Americans who are well-known life course researchers. And there is a smattering of European perspectives among the 32 chapters, as well as one chapter authored by a Canadian. But the overall tenor is overwhelmingly American. In particular, there is only a hint of the treasure trove of Asian research and data on the life course. This misses a good deal of the social and cultural contexts in which life courses are shaped and lived. Thus, a *Volume III* might be a good idea.