

CHAPTER 1

A Life Course Perspective

Elizabeth D. Hutchison

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CHAPTER 1

A Life Course Perspective

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Why do social workers need to understand how people change from birth to death?
What do social workers need to know about biological, psychological, social, and spiritual changes over the life course?
Why do different people react to the same type of stressful life event in different ways?

Key Ideas

As you read this chapter, take note of these central ideas:

1. The life course perspective attempts to understand the continuities as well as the twists and turns in the paths of individual lives.
2. The life course perspective recognizes the influence of historical changes on human behavior.
3. The life course perspective recognizes the importance of timing of lives not just in terms of chronological age but also in terms of biological age, psychological age, social age, and spiritual age.
4. The life course perspective emphasizes the ways in which humans are interdependent and gives special attention to the family as the primary arena for experiencing and interpreting the wider social world.
5. The life course perspective sees humans as capable of making choices and constructing their own life journeys, within systems of opportunities and constraints.
6. The life course perspective emphasizes diversity in life journeys and the many sources of that diversity.
7. The life course perspective recognizes the linkages between childhood and adolescent experiences and later experiences in adulthood.

12 The Changing Life Course**CASE STUDY 1.1****DAVID SANCHEZ'S SEARCH FOR CONNECTIONS**

David Sanchez has a Hispanic name, but he explains to you, as you ready him for discharge from the hospital, that he is a member of the Navajo tribe. He has spent most of his life in New Mexico but came to Los Angeles to visit his son Marco, age 29, and his grandchildren. While he was visiting them, he was brought to the emergency room and then hospitalized for what has turned out to be a diabetic coma. He had been aware of losing weight during the past year, and felt ill at times, but thought these symptoms were just signs of getting older or, perhaps, the vestiges of his alcoholism from the ages of 20 to 43. Now in his 50s, although he has been sober for 7 years, he is not surprised when his body reminds him how he abused it.

You suggest to Mr. Sanchez that he will need to follow up in the outpatient clinic, but he indicates that he needs to return to New Mexico. There he is eligible, as a Vietnam veteran, for health services at the local VA hospital outpatient clinic. He also receives a disability check for a partial disability from the war. He has not been to the VA since his rehabilitation from alcohol abuse, but he is committed to seeing someone there as soon as he gets home.

During recent visits with Marco and his family, David started to recognize how much his years of alcohol abuse hurt his son. After Mrs. Sanchez divorced David, he could never be relied on to visit Marco or to provide child support. Now that Marco has his own family, David hopes that by teaching his grandchildren the ways of the Navajo, he will pay Marco back a little for neglecting him. During the frequent visits of this past year, Marco has asked David to teach him and his son how to speak Navajo. This gesture has broken down some of the bad feelings between them.

David has talked about his own childhood during recent visits, and Marco now realizes how much his father suffered as a child. David was raised by his maternal grandmother after his father was killed in a car accident when David was 7. His mother had been very ill since his birth and was too overwhelmed by her husband's death to take care of David.

Just as David became attached to his grandmother, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) moved him to a boarding school. His hair was cut short with a tuft left at his forehead, which gave the teachers something to pull when he was being reprimanded. Like most Indian children, David suffered this harshness in silence. Now he feels that it is important to break this silence. He has told his grandchildren about having his mouth washed out with soap for speaking Navajo. He jokes that he has been baptized in four different

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religions—Mormon, Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopalian—because these were the religious groups running the boarding schools he attended. He also remembers the harsh beatings for not studying, or for committing other small infractions, before the BIA changed its policies for boarding homes and the harsh beatings diminished.

David often spent holidays at the school, because his grandmother had no money for transportation. He remembers feeling so alone. When David did visit his grandmother, he realized he was forgetting his Navajo and saw that she was aging quickly.

He joined the Marines when he was 18, like many high school graduates of that era, and his grandmother could not understand why he wanted to join the “white man’s war.” David now recognizes why his grandmother questioned his decision to go to war. During his alcohol treatments, especially during the use of the Native sweatlodge, he often relived the horrible memories of the bombings and killings in Vietnam; these were the memories he spent his adult life trying to silence with his alcohol abuse. Like many veterans, he ended up on the streets, homeless, seeking only the numbness his alcoholism provided. But the memories were always there. Sometimes his memories of the children in the Vietnam villages reminded him of the children from the boarding schools who had been so scared; some of the Vietnamese children even looked like his Indian friends.

It was through the Indian medicine retreats during David’s rehabilitation that he began to touch a softer reality. He began to believe in a higher order again. Although his father’s funeral had been painful, David experienced his grandmother’s funeral in a more spiritual way. It was as if she was there guiding him to enter his new role. David now realizes this was a turning point in his life.

At his grandmother’s funeral, David’s great-uncle, a medicine man, asked him to come and live with him because he was getting too old to cut or carry wood. He also wanted to teach David age-old cures that would enable him to help others struggling with alcohol dependency, from Navajo as well as other tribes. Although David is still learning, his work with other alcoholics has been inspirational, and he finds he can make special connections to Vietnam veterans.

Recently, David attended a conference where one of the First Nation speakers talked about the transgenerational trauma that families experienced because of the horrible beatings children encountered at the boarding schools. David is thankful that his son has broken the cycle of alcoholism

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and did not face the physical abuse to which he was subjected. But he is sad that his son was depressed for many years as a teen and young man. Now, both he and Marco are working to heal their relationship. They draw on the meaning and strength of their cultural and spiritual rituals. David's new role as spiritual and cultural teacher in his family has provided him with respect he never anticipated. Finally he is able to use his grandmother's wise teachings and his healing apprenticeship with his great-uncle to help his immediate family and his tribe.

As the social worker helping Mr. Sanchez with his discharge plans, you are aware that discharge planning involves one life transition that is a part of a larger life trajectory.

By Maria E. Zuniga

CASE STUDY 1.2

MAHDI MAHDI'S SHARED JOURNEY

In your refugee resettlement work, you are eager to learn all you can about the refugee experience. You are learning from your clients, but you also find it helpful to talk with other resettlement workers who have made a successful adjustment after entering the United States as a refugee. You have been particularly grateful for what you have learned from conversations with Mahdi Mahdi. Mahdi works as an immigration specialist at Catholic Social Services in Phoenix, providing the kind of services that he could have used when he came to Phoenix as a refugee 10 years ago.

Mahdi was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1957. His father was a teacher, and his mother stayed at home to raise Mahdi and his four brothers and two sisters. Mahdi remembers the Baghdad of his childhood as a mix of old and new architecture and traditional and modern ways of life. Life in Baghdad was "very good" for him until about 1974, when political unrest and military control changed the quality of life.

Mahdi and his wife were married after they graduated from Baghdad University with degrees in fine arts in 1982. Mahdi started teaching art in high school when he graduated from college, but he was immediately

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drafted as an officer in the military to fight in the Iran-Iraq War. He was supposed to serve for only 2 years, but the war went on for 8 years, and he was not able to leave the military until 1989. Mahdi recalls that many of his friends were killed in the war.

By the end of the war, Mahdi and his wife had two daughters, and after the war Mahdi went back to teaching. He began to think, however, of moving to the United States, where two of his brothers had already immigrated. He began saving money and was hoping to immigrate in November 1990.

But on August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and the second Persian Gulf War began. Mahdi was drafted again to fight in this war, but he refused to serve. According to the law in Iraq, anyone refusing the draft would be shot in front of his house. Mahdi had to go into hiding, and he remembers this as a very frightening time.

After a few months, Mahdi took his wife, two children, and brother in a car and escaped from Baghdad. He approached the American army on the border of Iraq and Kuwait. The Americans took Mahdi and his family to a camp at Rafha in northern Saudi Arabia and left them there with the Saudi Arabian soldiers. Mahdi's wife and children were very unhappy in the camp. The sun was hot, there was nothing green to be seen, and the wind storms were frightening. Mahdi also reports that the Saudi soldiers treated the Iraqi refugees like animals, beating them with sticks.

Mahdi and his family were in the refugee camp for about a year and a half. He was very frightened because he had heard that some members of the Saudi Arabian army had an unofficial agreement with the Iraqi army to drop any refugees that they wanted at the Iraq border. One day he asked a man who came into the camp to help him get a letter to one of his brothers. Mahdi also wrote to the U.S. embassy. Mahdi's brother petitioned to have him removed from the camp, and Mahdi and his family were taken to the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh. Mahdi worked as a volunteer at the embassy for almost a month, and then he and his family flew to Switzerland, on to New York, and finally to Arizona. It was now September of 1992.

Mahdi and his family lived with one of his brothers for about a month and a half, and then they moved into their own apartment. Mahdi worked as a cashier in a convenience store and took English classes at night. He wanted to be able to help his daughters with their schoolwork. Mahdi reports that although the culture was very different from what he and his family were accustomed to, it did not all come as a surprise. Iraq was the first Middle

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Eastern country to get television, and Mahdi knew a lot about the United States from the programs he saw.

After a year and a half at the convenience store, Mahdi decided to open his own moving company, USA Moving Company. He also went to school half time to study physics and math. He kept the moving company for 2 years, but it was hard. Some customers didn't like his accent, and some of the people he hired didn't like to work for an Iraqi.

After he gave up the moving company, Mahdi taught seventh grade fine arts in a public school for a couple of years. He did not enjoy this job, because the students were not respectful to him.

For the past 6 years, Mahdi has worked as an immigration specialist for Catholic Social Services. He enjoys this work very much, and has assisted refugees and immigrants from many countries, including Somalia, Vietnam, and the Kosovo region of Yugoslavia. Mahdi has finished 20 credits toward a master's degree in art education, and he thinks he might go back to teaching someday.

Mahdi's father died in 1982 from a heart attack; Mahdi thinks that worries about his sons' safety killed his father. Mahdi's mother immigrated to Arizona in 1996 and lives about a mile from Mahdi and his family, next door to one of Mahdi's brothers. (Three of Mahdi's brothers are in Phoenix and one is in Canada. One sister is in Norway and the other is in Ukraine.) Mahdi's mother loves being near the grandchildren, but she does not speak English and thus has a hard time meeting new people. In 1994, Mahdi and his wife had a third daughter. About 11 months ago, Mahdi's mother- and father-in-law immigrated to the United States and came to live with Mahdi and his family. His wife now stays home to take care of them. Mahdi is sensitive to how hard it is for them to move to a new culture at their age.

Mahdi and his family live in a neighborhood of white Americans. His daughters' friends are mostly white Americans and Hispanic Americans. Although Mahdi and his family are Sahih Muslim, Mahdi says that he is not a very religious person. They do not go to mosque, and his wife does not wear a veil—although his mother does. Mahdi says that his faith is a personal matter, and he does not like to draw attention to it. It is much better, he says, to keep it personal.

This part of the conversation brings Mahdi to mention the aftermath of September 11, 2001, and what it is like living in the United States as an Iraqi American since the terrorist attack. He says that, overall, people have been very good to him, although he has had some bad experiences on the

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street a few times, when people have stopped him and pointed their fingers angrily in his face. His neighbors and colleagues at work have offered their support.

Mahdi suggests that you might want to talk with his daughter, Rusel, to get another view of the family's immigration experience. Rusel recently graduated from high school and is preparing to enroll at the University of Arizona to study civil engineering.

When Rusel thinks of Baghdad, it is mostly the war that she remembers. She remembers the trip in the car that took her family away from Baghdad, and she remembers being confused about what was happening. Her memories of the refugee camp in Rafha are not pleasant. The physical environment was strange and frightening to her: no trees, hot sand, flies everywhere, no water for a shower, no way to get cool, living in a tent with the sound of sandstorms.

When the Mahdi family left the camp, Rusel did not know where they were going, but she was glad to be leaving. Her memories of coming to the United States are very positive. She was happy to be living in a house instead of a tent and to be surrounded by uncles, aunts, and cousins. At first, it was very hard to communicate at school, but her teacher assigned another student, Nikki, to help Rusel adjust. Rusel is still grateful for the way that Nikki made her feel comfortable in her new surroundings. Rusel is also quick to add that she was in an English as a second language (ESL) program for 3 years, and she wants everybody to know how important ESL is for immigrant children. Certainly, she now speaks with remarkable English fluency. Rusel also is grateful that she had "Aunt Sue," an American woman married to one of her uncles, who helped her whole family adjust. She knows that many immigrant families come to the United States without that kind of built-in assistance, and she is proud of the work her father does at the Catholic Social Services.

Rusel is an exuberant young woman, full of excitement about her future. She turned somber, however, at the end of the conversation when she brought up the subject of September 11, 2001. She was very frightened then, and continues to be frightened, about how people in the United States view her and other Arabic people. She says, "I would not hurt a fly," but she fears that people will make other assumptions about her.

As a social worker who will assist many refugee families, you appreciate learning about Mahdi Mahdi's preimmigration experience, migration journey, and resettlement adjustments. You know, however, that each immigration journey is unique.

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AFTER SEPTEMBER 11, 2001**

Maria is a busy, active 3-year-old whose life was changed by the events of September 11, 2001. Her mother, Emma Suarez, worked at the World Trade Center and is still listed as missing.

Emma was born in Puerto Rico and came to the mainland to live in the South Bronx when she was 5, along with her parents, a younger brother, two sisters, and an older brother. Emma's father, Carlos, worked hard to make a living for his family, sometimes working as many as three jobs at once. After the children were all in school, Emma's mother, Rosa, began to work as a domestic worker in the homes of a few wealthy families in Manhattan.

Emma was a strong student from her first days in public school, and was often at the top of her class. Her younger brother, Juan, and the sister closest to her in age, Carmen, also were good students, but they were never the star pupils that Emma was. The elder brother, Jesus, and sister, Aida, struggled in school from the time they came to the South Bronx, and both dropped out before they finished high school. Jesus has returned to Puerto Rico to live on the farm with his grandparents.

During her summer vacations from high school, Emma often cared for the children of some of the families for whom her mother worked. One employer was particularly impressed with Emma's quickness and pleasant temperament and took a special interest in her. She encouraged Emma to apply to colleges in her senior year in high school. Emma was accepted at City College and was planning to begin as a full-time student after high school graduation.

A month before Emma was to start school, however, her father had a stroke and was unable to return to work. Rosa and Aida rearranged their work schedules so that they could share the care of Carlos. Carmen had a husband and two young children of her own. Emma realized that she was now needed as an income earner. She took a position doing data entry in an office in the World Trade Center and took evening courses on a part-time basis. She was studying to be a teacher, because she loved learning and wanted to pass on that love to other students.

And then Emma found herself pregnant. She knew that Alejandro Padilla, a young man in one of her classes at school, was the father. Alejandro said that he was not ready to marry, however. Emma returned to work a month after Maria was born, but she did not return to school. At first, Rosa and Aida were not happy that Emma was pregnant with no plans to marry, but once Maria

CASE STUDY 1.3

was born, they fell hopelessly in love with her. They were happy to share the care of Maria, along with Carlos, while Emma worked. Emma cared for Maria and Carlos in the evenings so that Rosa and Aida could work.

Maria was, indeed, an engaging baby, and she was thriving with the adoration of Rosa, Carlos, Aida, Juan, and Emma. Emma missed school, but she held on to her dreams to be a teacher someday.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Emma left early for work at her job on the 84th floor of the south tower of the World Trade Center, because she was nearing a deadline on a big project. Aida was bathing Carlos when Carmen called about a plane hitting the World Trade Center. Aida called Emma's number, but did not get through to her.

The next few days, even weeks, are a blur to the Suarez family. Juan, Carmen, and Aida took turns going to the Family Assistance Center, but there was no news about Emma. At one point, Juan brought Rosa to the Red Cross Disaster Counseling Center where you were working because he was worried about her. She seemed to be near collapse.

Juan, Rosa, and Aida all missed a lot of work for a number of weeks, and the cash flow sometimes became problematic. They have been blessed with the generosity of their Catholic parish, employers, neighbors, and a large extended family, however, and financial worries are not their greatest concerns at the moment. They are relieved that Maria will have access to money for a college education. But they miss Emma terribly and struggle to understand the horrific thing that happened to her. They all still have nightmares about planes hitting tall buildings.

Maria is lucky to have such a close loving family, and she has gradually quit asking for her mother. She seems keenly aware, however, that there is enormous sadness in her home, and her hugs don't seem to take away the pain.

As a social worker doing disaster relief, you are aware of the large impact that disasters have on the multigenerational family, both in the present and for years to come.

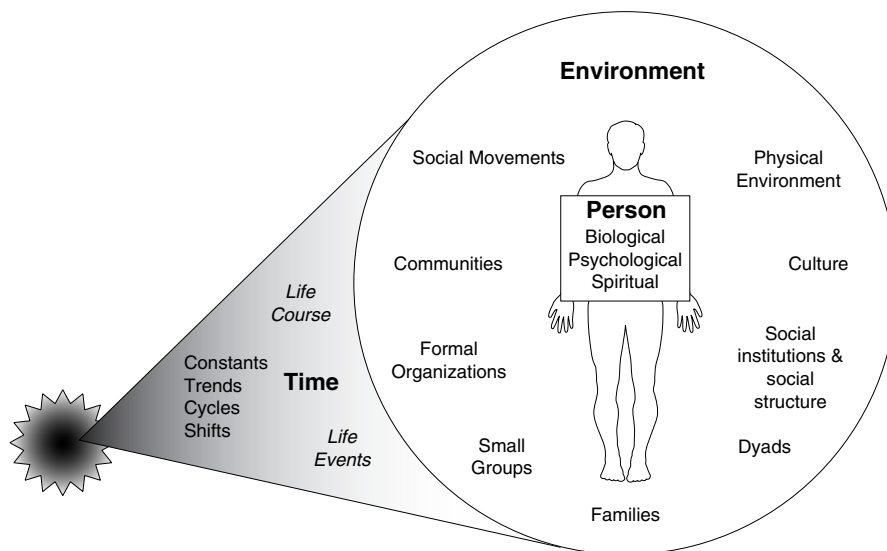
A Definition of the Life Course Perspective

One of the things that the stories of David Sanchez, Mahdi Mahdi, and the Suarez family have in common is that they unfolded over time, across multiple generations. We all have stories that unfold as we progress through life. A useful way to understand this

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EXHIBIT 1.1

The Relationship of
Person, Environment,
and Time



relationship between time and human behavior is the **life course perspective**, which looks at how chronological age, common life transitions, and social change shape people's lives from birth to death. Of course, time is only one dimension of human behavior; characteristics of the person and the environment in which the person lives also play a part (see Exhibit 1.1). But it is common and sensible to try to understand a person by looking at the way that person has developed throughout different periods of life.

You could think of the life course as a path. But note that it is not a straight path; it is a path with both continuities and twists and turns. Certainly, we see twists and turns in the life stories of David Sanchez, Mahdi Mahdi, and Emma Suarez. Think of your own life path. How straight has it been to date?

If you want to understand a person's life, you might begin with an **event history**, or the sequence of significant events, experiences, and transitions in a person's life from birth to death. An event history for David Sanchez might include suffering his father's death as a child, moving to live with his grandmother, being removed to a boarding school, fighting in the Vietnam War, getting married, becoming a father, divorcing, being treated for substance abuse, participating in Indian medicine retreats, attending his grandmother's funeral, moving to live with his great-uncle, and reconnecting with Marco. Mahdi Mahdi's event history would most likely include the date he was drafted, the end of the Iran-Iraq War, escape from Baghdad, and resettlement in the United States. For little Maria Suarez, the events of September 11, 2001 will become a permanent part of her life story.

You might also try to understand a person in terms of how that person's life has been synchronized with family members' lives across time. David Sanchez has begun to have a clearer understanding of his linkages to his great-uncle, father, son, and grandchildren. Mahdi Mahdi tells his story in terms of family connections, and Maria's story is thoroughly entwined with that of her multigenerational family.

Finally, you might view the life course in terms of how culture and social institutions shape the pattern of individual lives. David Sanchez's life course was shaped by cultural and institutional preferences for placing Indian children in boarding schools during middle childhood and adolescence and for recommending the military for youth and young adults. Mahdi Mahdi's life course was also heavily influenced by cultural expectations about soldiering. The economic system is shaping Maria Suarez's life, through its influence on work opportunities for her family members.

Theoretical Roots of the Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective is a theoretical model that has been emerging over the last 40 years, across several disciplines. Sociologists, anthropologists, social historians, demographers, and psychologists—working independently and, more recently, collaboratively—have all helped to give it shape.

Glen Elder Jr., a sociologist, was one of the early authors of a life course perspective, and continues to be one of the driving forces behind its development. In the early 1960s, he began to analyze data from three pioneering longitudinal studies of children that had been undertaken by the University of California, Berkeley. As he examined several decades of data, he was struck with the enormous impact of the Great Depression of the 1930s on individual and family pathways (Elder, 1974). He began to call for developmental theory and research that looked at the influence of historical forces on family, education, and work roles.

At about the same time, social history emerged as a serious field. Social historians were particularly interested in retrieving the experiences of ordinary people, from their own vantage point, rather than telling the historical story from the vantage point of the wealthy and powerful. Tamara Hareven (1978, 1982b, 1996, 2000) has played a key role in developing the subdiscipline of the history of the family. She is particularly interested in how families change and adapt under changing historical conditions and how individuals and families synchronize their lives to accommodate to changing social conditions.

As will become clearer later in the chapter, the life course perspective also draws on traditional theories of developmental psychology, which look at the events that typically occur in people's lives during different stages. The life course perspective differs from these psychological theories in one very important way, however. Developmental

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EXHIBIT 1.2

Basic Concepts of the Life Course Perspective

Cohort: Group of persons who were born at the same historical time and who experience particular social changes within a given culture in the same sequence and at the same age.

Transition: Change in roles and statuses that represents a distinct departure from prior roles and statuses.

Trajectory: Long-term pattern of stability and change, which usually involves multiple transitions.

Life Event: Significant occurrence involving a relatively abrupt change that may produce serious and long-lasting effects.

Turning Point: Life event that produces a lasting shift in the life course trajectory.

psychology looks for universal, predictable events and pathways, but the life course perspective calls attention to how historical time and the person's culture affect the individual experience of each life stage.

Basic Concepts of the Life Course Perspective

Scholars who write from a life course perspective and social workers who apply the life course perspective in their work rely on a handful of staple concepts: cohorts, transitions, trajectories, life events, and turning points (see Exhibit 1.2 for concise definitions). As you read about each concept, imagine how it applies to the lives of David Sanchez, Mahdi Mahdi, and Maria Suarez, as well as to your own life.

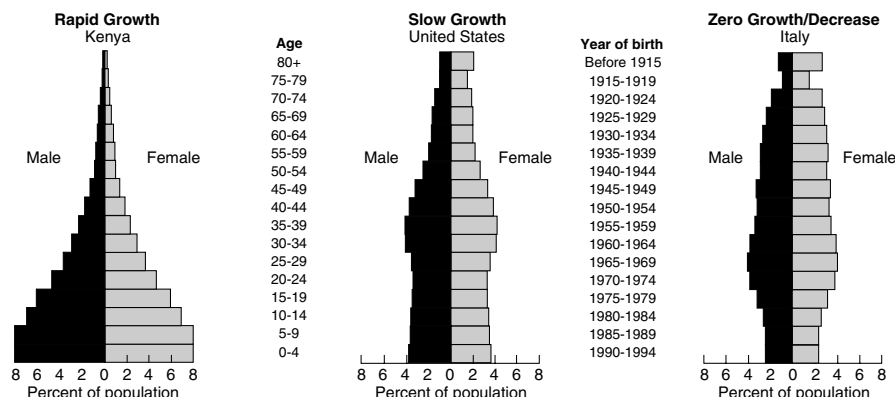
Cohorts

With their attention to the historical context of developmental pathways, life course scholars have found the concept of cohort to be very useful. In the life course perspective, a **cohort** is a group of persons who were born at the same historical time and experience particular social changes within a given culture in the same sequence and at the same age (Rosow, 1978; Ryder, 1965; Settersten & Mayer, 1997).

Cohorts differ in size, and these differences affect opportunities for education, work, and family life. For example, the baby boom that followed World War II produced a large cohort. When this large cohort entered the labor force, surplus labor drove wages down and unemployment up (Pearlin & Skaff, 1996; Uhlenberg, 1996). Similarly, the large "baby boom echo" cohort is now competing for slots in prestigious universities (Argetsinger, 2001).

EXHIBIT 1.3

Population Pyramids:
Kenya, United
States, and
Italy, 1995



Permission needed: Figure 6, page 27 from McFalls, J. (1998). Population composition. *Population Bulletin*, 53(3), 26-34.

Source: McFalls, 1998, p. 27.

Some observers suggest that cohorts develop strategies for the special circumstances they face (Easterlin, Schaeffer, & Macunovich, 1993). They suggest that “boomers” responded to the economic challenges of their demographic bubble by delaying or avoiding marriage, postponing childbearing, having fewer children, and increasing the presence of mothers in the labor force.

One way to visualize the configuration of cohorts in a given society is through the use of a **population pyramid**, a chart that depicts the proportion of the population in each age group. As Exhibit 1.3 demonstrates, different countries have significantly different population pyramids. In rapid-growth countries, like Kenya, fertility rates are high and the majority of people are young (McFalls, 1998). Slow-growth countries, like the United States, have a high number of older adults and are becoming increasingly dependent on immigration (typically more attractive to young adults) for a work force to support the aging population. Migration of legal and illegal immigrants accounted for more than one fourth of the U.S.’s population growth in the 1980s and for about one third of the growth in the 1990s. In zero-growth or decreasing countries, like Italy, fertility is at or below replacement level. If it goes and stays below replacement level, the population will begin to decline.

Exhibit 1.3 also shows the ratio of males to females in each population. A cohort’s **sex ratio** is the number of males per 100 females. Sex ratios affect a cohort’s marriage rates, childbearing practices, crime rates, and family stability (McFalls, 1998). For some time, sex ratios at birth have been lower for blacks than for whites in the United States, meaning that fewer black boy babies are born per 100 girl babies than is the case in the white population (see Ulizzi & Zonta, 1994). This disparity holds up across the life course, with a sex ratio of 81 men to 100 women among black adults over 18 compared

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to 94 men to 100 women among white adults. When this difference in sex ratios is juxtaposed with a growing disadvantage of black men in the labor market and their increasing rates of incarceration, it is not surprising that a greater percentage of black adults (39%) than white adults (21%) had never been married in 1999 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). As shown in Exhibit 1. 3, the ratio of men to women declines across adulthood in all three countries. In the United States, the sex ratio drops to 40 men for every 100 women in the 85 and older population (McFalls, 1998).

Transitions

A life course perspective is stage-like because it proposes that each person experiences a number of **transitions**, or changes in roles and statuses that represent a distinct departure from prior roles and statuses (George, 1993). Life is full of such transitions: starting school, entering puberty, leaving school, getting a first job, leaving home, retiring, and so on. Leaving his grandmother's home for boarding school and enrolling in the military were important transitions for David Sanchez. Rusel Mahdi is excited about the transition from high school to college.

Many transitions relate to family life: marriages, births, divorces, remarriages, deaths (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999b). Each transition changes family statuses and roles and generally is accompanied by family members' exits and entrances. We can see the dramatic effects of birth and death on the Suarez family as Maria entered and Emma exited the family circle.

Transitions in collectivities other than the family, such as small groups, communities, and formal organizations, also involve exits and entrances of members, as well as changes in statuses and roles. In college, for example, students pass through in a steady stream. Some of them make the transition from undergraduate to graduate student, and in that new status they may take on the new role of teaching or research assistant.

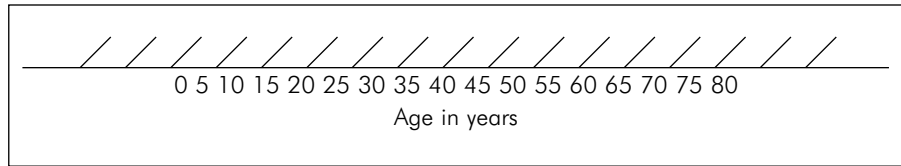
Trajectories

The changes involved in transitions are discrete and bounded; when they happen, an old phase of life ends and a new phase begins. In contrast, **trajectories** involve long-term patterns of stability and change in a person's life, and usually involve multiple transitions. We do not necessarily expect trajectories to be a straight line, but we do expect them to have some continuity of direction. For example, we assume that once David Sanchez became addicted to alcohol, he set forth on a path of increased use of alcohol and deteriorating ability to uphold his responsibilities, with multiple transitions involving family disruption and job instability.

Because individuals and families live their lives in multiple spheres, their lives are made up of multiple, intersecting trajectories—for example, educational trajectories,

EXHIBIT 1.4

My Lifeline
(Interlocking
Trajectories)



Assuming that you will live until at least 80 years of age, chart how you think your life course trajectory will look. Write in major events and transitions at the appropriate ages. To get a picture of the interlocking trajectories of your lifeline, you may want to write family events and transitions in one color, educational events and transitions in another, occupational events and transitions in another, and health events and transitions in another.

family life trajectories, health trajectories, and work trajectories (Cooksey, Menaghan, & Jekielek, 1997; Settersten & Mayer, 1997; Shanahan, Miech, & Elder, 1998). These interlocking trajectories can be presented visually on separate lifeline charts or as a single lifeline. See Exhibit 1.4 for instructions on completing a lifeline of interlocking trajectories.

Life Events

Specific events predominate in the stories of David Sanchez, Mahdi Mahdi, and Maria Suarez: death of a parent, escape from the homeland, terrorist attack. A **life event** is a significant occurrence involving a relatively abrupt change that may produce serious and long-lasting effects (Settersten & Mayer, 1997). “Life event” refers to the happening itself and not to the transitions that will occur because of the happening.

One common method for evaluating the effect of such stressful events is Thomas Holmes & Richard Rahe’s Schedule of Recent Events, also called the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes, 1978; Holmes & Rahe, 1967). The Schedule of Recent Events, along with the rating of the stress associated with each event, appears in Exhibit 1.5. Holmes and Rahe constructed their schedule of events by asking respondents to rate the relative degree of adjustment required for different life events.

Inventories like the Schedule of Recent Events can remind us of some of the life events that affect human behavior and life course trajectories, but they also have limitations:

Life events inventories are not finely tuned. One suggestion is to classify life events along several dimensions: “major versus minor, anticipated versus unanticipated, controllable versus uncontrollable, typical versus atypical, desirable versus undesirable, acute versus chronic.” (Settersten & Mayer, 1997, p. 246)

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EXHIBIT 1.5

Life Change Events from the Holmes and Rahe Schedule of Recent Events

Life Event	Stress Rating
Death of a spouse	100
Divorce	73
Marital separation from mate	65
Detention in jail or other institutions	63
Death of a close family member	63
Major personal injury or illness	53
Marriage	50
Being fired at work	47
Marital reconciliation with mate	45
Retirement from work	45
Major change in the health or behavior of a family member	44
Pregnancy	40
Sexual difficulties	39
Gaining a new family member (e.g., through birth, adoption, elder moving in)	39
Major business readjustment (e.g., merger, reorganization, bankruptcy)	39
Major change in financial state (a lot worse off or a lot better off than usual)	38
Death of a close friend	37
Changing to a different line of work	36
Major change in the number of arguments with spouse (more or less)	35
Taking out a mortgage or loan for a major purchase	31
Foreclosure on a mortgage or loan	30
Major change in responsibilities at work (e.g., promotion, demotion, lateral transfer)	29
Son or daughter leaving home	29
Trouble with in-laws	29
Outstanding personal achievement	28
Wife beginning or ceasing work outside the home	26
Beginning or ceasing formal schooling	26
Major change in living conditions (e.g., building a new home, remodeling, deterioration of home or neighborhood)	25
Revision of personal habits (e.g., dress, manners, associations)	24
Trouble with the boss	23
Major change in working hours or conditions	20
Change in residence	20
Change to a new school	20
Major change in usual type and/or amount of recreation	19
Major change in church activities (e.g., a lot more or a lot less than usual)	19
Major change in social activities (e.g., clubs, dancing, movies, visiting)	18
Taking out a mortgage or loan for a lesser purchase (e.g., for a car, TV, freezer)	17

(continued)

EXHIBIT 1.5Life Change Events from the Holmes and Rahe Schedule of Recent Events (*continued*)

Life Event	Stress Rating
Major change in sleeping habits (a lot more or a lot less sleep, or change in part of day when asleep)	16
Major change in number of family get-togethers (e.g., a lot more or a lot less than usual)	15
Major change in eating habits (a lot less food intake or very different meal hours or surroundings)	15
Vacation	13
Christmas	12
Minor violations of the law (e.g., traffic tickets, jaywalking, disturbing the peace)	11

PERMISSION NEEDED. Holmes, T. (1978). Life situations, emotions, and disease. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 19, 747.

Source: Holmes, 1978.

Existing inventories are biased toward undesirable, rather than desirable, events. Not all life events prompt harmful life changes (Pearlin & Skaff, 1996).

Specific life events have different meanings to various individuals and to various collectivities. Those distinctive meanings have not been measured in most research on life events (George, 1996; Hareven, 2000). One example of a study that has taken different meanings into account found that women report more vivid memories of life events in relationships than men report (Ross & Holmberg, 1992).

Life events inventories are biased toward events more commonly experienced by certain groups of people: young adults, men, whites, and the middle class (Settersten & Mayer, 1997, p. 246). In one small exploratory study that used a lifeline rather than an inventory of events in an attempt to correct for this bias, women reported a greater number of life events than men did (de Vries & Watt, 1996).

Turning Points

David Sanchez describes becoming an apprentice medicine man as a turning point in his life. For Mahdi Mahdi, the decision to refuse the draft was a turning point. Even though Maria Suarez was too young to think of September 11, 2001, as a turning point in her life, there is no doubt that the events of that day changed the course of her life. A **turning point** is a special life event that produces a lasting shift in the life course trajectory. It must lead to more than a temporary detour. As significant as they are to individuals' lives, turning points usually become obvious only as time passes (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). Yet in one survey, more than 85% of the respondents reported

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that there had been turning points in their lives (Clausen, 1990, cited in Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). According to traditional developmental theory, the developmental trajectory is more or less continuous, proceeding steadily from one phase to another. But life course trajectories are seldom so smooth and predictable. They involve many discontinuities, or sudden breaks, and some special life events become turning points that produce a lasting shift in the life course trajectory. Inertia tends to keep us on a particular trajectory, but turning points add twists and turns or even reversals to the life course (Wheaton and Gotlib, 1997). For example, we expect someone who is addicted to alcohol to continue to organize his or her life around that substance unless some event becomes a turning point for recovery.

Three types of life events can serve as turning points (Rutter, 1996):

1. Life events that either close or open opportunities
2. Life events that make a lasting change on the person's environment
3. Life events that change a person's self-concept, beliefs, or expectations

Some events, such as migration to a new country, are momentous because they qualify as all three types of events. Migration, whether voluntary or involuntary, certainly makes a lasting change on the environment in which the person lives; it may also close and open opportunities and cause a change in self-concept and beliefs. Certainly, that seems to be the case with Mahdi Mahdi. Keep in mind, however, that individuals make subjective assessments of life events (George, 1996). The same type of life event may be a turning point for one individual, family, or other collectivity, but not for another. Less dramatic transitions may also become turning points, depending on the individual's assessment of its importance. A transition can become a turning point under five conditions (Hareven, 2000):

1. When the transition occurs simultaneously with a crisis or is followed by a crisis
2. When the transition involves family conflict over the needs and wants of individuals and the greater good of the family unit
3. When the transition is "off-time," meaning that it does not occur at the typical stage in life
4. When the transition is followed by unforeseen negative consequences
5. When the transition requires exceptional social adjustments

Loss of a parent is not always a turning point, but when such a loss occurs off-time, as it did with David Sanchez and Maria Suarez, it is often a turning point. Emma Suarez

may not have thought of her decision to take a job in the World Trade Center as a turning point, because she could not foresee the events of September 11, 2001.

Most life course pathways include multiple turning points, some that get life trajectories off track and others that get life trajectories back on track (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). David Sanchez's Vietnam experience seems to have gotten him off track, and his grandmother's death seems to have gotten him back on track. In fact, we could say that the intent of many social work interventions is to get life course trajectories back on track. We do this when we work with a family that has gotten off track and on a path to divorce. We also do this when we plan interventions to precipitate a turning point toward recovery for a client with an addiction. Or we may plan an intervention to help a deteriorating community reclaim its lost sense of community and spirit of pride. It is interesting to note that many social service organizations have taken "Turning Point" for their name.

Major Themes of the Life Course Perspective

Almost a decade ago, Glen Elder (1994) identified four dominant, and interrelated, themes in the life course approach: interplay of human lives and historical time, timing of lives, linked or interdependent lives, and human agency in making choices. The meaning of these themes is discussed below, along with the meaning of two other related themes that Elder (1998) and Michael Shanahan (2000) have recently identified as important: diversity in life course trajectories and developmental risk and protection. The meaning of these themes is summarized in Exhibit 1.6.

Interplay of Human Lives and Historical Time

As sociologists and social historians began to study individual and family life trajectories, they noted that persons born in different years face different historical worlds, with different options and constraints—especially in rapidly changing societies, such as the United States at the beginning of the 21st century. They suggested that historical time may produce **cohort effects**, which occur when social change affects one cohort differently than it affects subsequent cohorts. For example, Elder's (1974) research on children and the Great Depression found that the life course trajectories of the cohort that were young children at the time of the economic downturn were more seriously affected by family hardship than the cohort that were in middle childhood and late adolescence at the time.

Analysis of large data sets by a number of researchers provides forceful evidence that changes in other social institutions impinge on family and individual life course trajectories (e.g., Cooksey, Menaghan, & Jekielek, 1997; Elder, 1986; Rindfuss,

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EXHIBIT 1.6

Major Themes of the Life Course Perspective

Interplay of human lives and historical time: Individual and family development must be understood in historical context.

Timing of lives: Particular roles and behaviors are associated with particular age groups, based on biological age, psychological age, social age, and spiritual age.

Linked or interdependent lives: Human lives are interdependent, and the family is the primary arena for experiencing and interpreting wider historical, cultural, and social phenomena.

Human agency in making choices: The individual life course is constructed by the choices and actions individuals take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances.

Diversity in life course trajectories: There is much diversity in life course pathways, due to cohort variations, social class, culture, gender, and individual agency.

Developmental risk and protection: Experiences with one life transition have an impact on subsequent transitions and events, and may either protect the life course trajectory or put it at risk.

Swicegood, & Rosenfeld, 1987; Shanahan et al., 1998). Tamara Hareven's historical analysis of family life (2000) documents the lag between social change and the development of public policy to respond to the new circumstances and the needs that arise with social change (see also Riley, 1996). One such lag today is the lag between trends in employment among mothers and public policy regarding child care during infancy and early childhood. Social work planners and administrators confront the results of such a lag in their work. Thus, they have some responsibility to keep the public informed about the impact of changing social conditions on individuals, families, communities, and formal organizations.

Timing of Lives

"How old are you?" You have probably been asked that question many times, and no doubt you find yourself curious about the age of new acquaintances. Every society appears to use age as an important variable, and many social institutions in advanced industrial societies are organized, in part, around age—the age for starting school, the age of majority, retirement age, and so on (Settersten & Mayer, 1997). In the United States, our speech abounds with expressions related to age: "terrible 2s," "sweet 16," "20-something," "life begins at 40," "senior discounts."

Age is also a prominent attribute in efforts by social scientists to bring order and predictability to our understanding of human behavior. Life course scholars are interested in the age at which specific life events and transitions occur, which they refer to as the timing of lives. They may classify entrances and exits from particular statuses and roles as “off-time” or “on-time,” based on social norms or shared expectations about the timing of such transitions (George, 1993). For example, childbearing in adolescence is considered off-time in modern industrial countries, although it is seen as on-time in many preindustrial societies. Likewise, death in early or middle adulthood, as happened in large numbers during the early stages of the AIDS epidemic, is considered off-time in modern industrial societies. Survivors’ grief is probably deeper in cases of “premature loss” (Pearlin & Skaff, 1996), which is perhaps why Emma Suarez’s family keeps saying, “She was so young; she had so much life left.” Certainly, David Sanchez reacted differently to his father’s and his grandmother’s deaths.

Dimensions of Age. Chronological age itself is not the only factor involved in timing of lives. Age-graded differences in roles and behaviors are the result of biological, psychological, social, and spiritual processes. Thus, age is often considered from each of the perspectives that make up the biopsychosocial framework (e.g., Cavanaugh, 1996; Kimmel, 1990; Settersten & Mayer, 1997). Although life course scholars have not directly addressed the issue of spiritual age, it is an important perspective as well.

Biological age indicates a person’s level of biological development and physical health, as measured by the functioning of the various organ systems. It is the present position of the biological person in relation to the potential life cycle. There is no simple, straightforward way to measure biological age. Any method for calculating it has been altered by changes in life expectancy (Shanahan, 2000) and by changes in the main causes of death (Bartley, Blane, & Montgomery, 1997). With the development of modern medicine, the causes of death have shifted from infectious diseases to chronic diseases (National Center for Health Statistics, 2001b). Life course researchers need to collaborate with geneticists to understand the effect on biological age of late-emerging genetic factors and with endocrinologists to understand how social processes are related to biological aging (Shanahan, 2000).

Psychological age has both behavioral and perceptual components. Behaviorally, psychological age refers to the capacities that people have and the skills they use to adapt to changing biological and environmental demands. Skills in memory, learning, intelligence, motivation, emotions, and so forth are all involved (Settersten & Mayer, 1997). Perceptually, psychological age is based on how old people perceive themselves to be. Life course researchers have explored the perceptual aspect of psychological age since the 1960s, sometimes with questions such as, “Do you feel that you are young, middle aged, old, or very old?” (e.g., Barak & Stern, 1986; Markides & Boldt, 1983). More

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recently, researchers have used a more multifaceted way of exploring perceived age. Some have distinguished between “feel-age, look-age, do-age, and interests-age” (Henderson, Goldsmith, & Flynn, 1995). Anthropological examination of life transitions suggests that men and women attach different social meanings to age and use different guidelines for measuring how old they are (Hagestad, 1991), but empirical research on the role gender plays in self-perceived age is mixed. Culture is another factor in perceptions of age. In one study, the researchers found less discrepancy between chronological age and self-perceived age among a Finnish sample than among a U.S. sample, with the U.S. sample demonstrating a definite tendency to say they considered themselves more youthful than their chronological age (Uotinen, 1998).

Social age refers to the age-graded roles and behaviors expected by society—in other words, the socially constructed meaning of various ages. The concept of **age norm** is used to indicate the behaviors that are expected of people of a specific age in a given society at a particular point in time. Age norms may be informal expectations, or they may be encoded as formal rules and laws. For example, cultures have an informal age norm about the appropriate age to begin romantic dating, if at all. On the other hand, we have developed formal rules about the appropriate age for driving, drinking alcohol, and voting. Life course scholars suggest that age norms vary not only across historical time and across societies but also by gender, race, ethnicity, and social class within a given time and society (Chudacoff, 1989; Kertzer, 1989; Settersten & Mayer, 1997). Although biological age and psychological age are recognized in the life course perspective, social age receives special emphasis. For instance, life course scholars use life phases such as early childhood and middle adulthood, which are based in large part on social age, to conceptualize human lives from birth to death. In this book, we talk about nine phases, from conception to very late adulthood. Keep in mind, however, that the number and nature of these life phases are socially constructed and have changed over time, with modernization and mass longevity leading to finer gradations in life phases and consequently a greater number of them (Settersten & Mayer, 1997).

Spiritual age indicates the current position of a person in the ongoing search for “meaning and morally fulfilling relationships” (Canda, 1997, p. 302). David Sanchez is certainly at a different position in his search for life’s meaning than he was when he came home from Vietnam. Although life course scholars have not paid much attention to spiritual age, it has been the subject of study by some developmental psychologists and other social scientists. In an exploration of the meaning of adulthood edited by Erik Erikson in 1978, several authors explored the markers of adulthood from the viewpoint of a number of spiritual and religious traditions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Several themes emerged across the various traditions: balance between contemplation and moral action, reason, self-discipline, character improvement, loving actions, and close community with others. All the authors

noted that spirituality is typically seen as a process of growth, a process with no end. James Fowler (1981) has presented a theory of faith development, based on 359 in-depth interviews, that strongly links it with chronological age. Ken Wilber's (1977, 1995) Full-Spectrum Model of Consciousness also proposes an association between age and spiritual development, but Wilbur does not suggest that spiritual development is strictly linear. He notes, as do the contributors to the Erikson book, that there can be regressions, temporary leaps, and turning points in a person's spiritual development.

Standardization in the Timing of Lives. Life course scholars debate whether the trend is toward greater standardization in age-graded social roles and statuses or toward greater diversification (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998; Shanahan, 2000). Ironically, life patterns seem to be becoming, at the same time, more standardized and more diversified. The implication for social workers is that we must pay attention to the uniqueness of each person's life course trajectory, but we can use research about regularities in the timing of lives to develop prevention programs. The "Knowledge Into Practice" story at the end of this book is a good example of a prevention program based on such research.

Some societies engage in **age structuring**, or standardizing of the ages at which social role transitions occur, by developing policies and laws that regulate the timing of these transitions. For example, the United States has laws and regulations about the ages for compulsory education, working (child labor), driving, drinking, being tried as an adult, marrying, holding public office, and receiving pensions and social insurance. However, countries vary considerably in the degree to which age norms are formalized (Settersten & Mayer, 1997; Shanahan, 2000). Some scholars suggest that formal age structuring becomes more prevalent as societies modernize (Buchmann, 1989; Meyer, 1986). Also, formal age structuring, as we know it, may not have been possible until we could predict that large numbers of people would survive to late adulthood (Kohli, 1986). This is one clear way in which social age is interrelated with biological age.

Formalized age structuring has created a couple of difficulties that affect social workers. One is that cultural lags often lead to a mismatch between changing circumstances and the age structuring in society (Foner, 1996). Consider the trend for corporations to offer early retirement, before the age of 65, in a time when people are living longer and with better health. This mismatch has implications both for public budgets and for individual lives. Another problem with the institutionalization of age norms is increasing age segregation; people are spending more of their time in groups consisting entirely of people their own age. Social work services are increasingly organized around the settings of these age-segregated groups: schools, the workplace, senior centers, and so forth.

Some life course scholars argue, however, that modernization has allowed the life course to become more flexibly structured (Guillemard & van Gunsteren, 1991;

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Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976). Indeed, there is much diversity in the sequencing and timing of adult life course markers, such as completing an education, beginning work, leaving home, marrying, and becoming a parent (George & Gold, 1991). Trajectories in the family domain may be more flexible than work and educational trajectories (Elder, 1998; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998). Life course trajectories also vary in significant ways by gender, race, ethnicity, and social class (Elder, 1998; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998; Shanahan, 2000). This issue will be discussed further later in the chapter.

To gain a better understanding of regularities and irregularities in life course trajectories, researchers have studied the order in which life events and transitions occur (George, 1993). Most of the research has been on the entrance into adulthood, focusing specifically on the completion of school, first full-time job, and first marriage (Hogan, 1978, 1981; Modell, Furstenberg, & Hershberg, 1976; Settersten, 1998; Shanahan, Miech, & Elder, 1998). Life course scholars also are interested in the length of time that an individual, family, or other collectivity spends in a particular state, without changes in status or roles. In general, the longer we experience specific environments and conditions, the more likely it is that our behavior will be affected by them (George, 1996). The duration of Mahdi Mahdi's stays in various settings and statuses—soldier, refugee, convenience store clerk, immigration specialist—was important. Finally, life course scholars are studying the pace of transitions. Transitions into adult roles in young adulthood (such as completing school, leaving home, getting the first job, getting married, having the first child) appear to be more rapidly timed than transitions in middle and late adulthood (such as launching children, retiring, losing parents) (Hareven, 1978, 2000).

Linked or Interdependent Lives

The life course perspective emphasizes the interdependence of human lives and the ways in which relationships both support and control an individual's behavior. **Social support**, which is defined as help rendered by others that benefits an individual (Thoits, 1985), is an obvious element of interdependent lives. Relationships also control behavior through expectations, rewards, and punishments.

Particular attention has been paid to the family as a source of support and control. In addition, the lives of family members are linked across generations, with both opportunity and misfortune having an intergenerational impact. The cases of David Sanchez, Mahdi Mahdi, and Maria Suarez are rich examples of lives linked across generations. But they are also rich examples of how people's lives are linked with those of people outside the family.

Links Between Family Members. Certainly, parents' and children's lives are linked. Elder's longitudinal research of children raised during the Great Depression found that

as parents experienced greater economic pressures, they faced a greater risk of depressed feelings and marital discord. Consequently, their ability to nurture their children was compromised, and their children were more likely to exhibit emotional distress, academic trouble, and problem behavior (Elder, 1974). The connection between family hardship, family nurturance, and child behaviors is now well established (e.g., Conger, Elder, Lorenz, Simons, & Whitbeck, 1992; Conger et al., 1993). These findings might help to explain recent reports that adolescents in the United States and Canada exhibited more academic and behavioral problems when their mothers moved from welfare to work if the family's economic situation became less stable in the process (Stepp, 2001). In addition to the economic connection between parents and children, parents provide social capital for their children, in terms of role models and networks of social support (Cooksey, Menaghan, & Jekielek, 1997).

It should also be noted that parents' lives are influenced by the trajectories of their children's lives. For example, parents may need to alter their work trajectories to respond to the needs of a terminally ill child. Or parents may forgo early retirement to assist their young adult children with education expenses. Mahdi Mahdi says that his father died from worrying about his sons.

Older adults and their adult children are also interdependent. The pattern of mutual support between older adults and their adult children is formed by life events and transitions across the life course (Hareven, 1996). It is also fundamentally changed when families go through historical disruptions such as wars or major economic downturns. For example, the traditional pattern of intergenerational support—parents supporting children—is often disrupted when one generation migrates and another generation stays behind. It is also disrupted in immigrant families when the children pick up the new language and cultural norms faster than the adults in the family and take on the role of interpreter for their parents and grandparents (Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999).

What complicates matters is that family roles must often be synchronized across three or more generations at once. Sometimes this synchronization does not go smoothly. Divorce, remarriage, and discontinuities in parents' work and educational trajectories may conflict with the needs of children (see, e.g., Arons, 1999; Cooksey, Menaghan, & Jekielek, 1997). Similarly, the timing of adult children's educational, family, and work transitions often conflicts with the needs of aging parents (Hareven, 1996). The "generation in the middle" may have to make uncomfortable choices when allocating scarce economic and emotional resources. When a significant life event in one generation (such as death of a grandparent) is juxtaposed with a significant life event in another generation (such as birth of a child), families and individual family members are especially vulnerable (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999b).

Links with the wider world. We know a lot more at this point about the ways that individuals and their multigenerational families are interdependent than about the

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interdependence between individuals and families and other groups and collectivities. However, we may at least note that work has a major effect on family transitions (George, 1993). In this vein, using data for 6- and 7-year-old children from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, researchers found that the children's depression and aggressive behavior were not associated with whether their mothers were employed but rather with the type of work those mothers did (Cooksey et al., 1997). Children whose mothers are in occupations requiring complex skills are less likely to be depressed and behave aggressively than children whose mothers are in less skilled work environments. Perhaps performing complex tasks at work enhances parenting skills. Or perhaps the mothers in more skilled occupations benefit emotionally from having greater control over their work environments. This finding would, of course, have meaning only in an advanced industrial society and would offer no insight about parenting skills in traditional societies.

The family seems to have much more influence on child and adolescent behaviors than the neighborhood does (Elder, 1998; Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999; Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, Gordon, & Chase-Lansdale, 1997). More differences in the behavior of children and adolescents have been found among families within a given neighborhood than have been found when comparing the families in one neighborhood with families in other neighborhoods. There is evidence, however, that the neighborhood effects may be greater for children living in high-poverty areas, which are often marked by violence and environmental health hazards, than for children living in low-poverty neighborhoods (Katz, Kling, & Liebman, 1999, cited in Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Rosenbaum, 1991).

It is important for social workers to remember that lives are also linked in systems of institutionalized privilege and oppression. The life trajectories of members of minority groups in the United States are marked by discrimination and lack of opportunity, which are experienced pervasively as daily insults and pressures. However, various cultural groups have devised unique systems of social support to cope with the "mundane extreme environments" in which they live (McAdoo, 1986). Examples include the extensive and intensive natural support systems of Hispanic families like the Suarez family (Falicov, 1999) and the special role of the church for African Americans (Billingsley, 1999).

Human Agency in Making Choices

Mahdi Mahdi made a decision to refuse the draft, and this decision had a momentous impact on his own life course as well as the trajectory of members of his extended family. Like all of us, he made choices that fundamentally changed his life (Elder, 1998). In other words, he participated in constructing his life course through the exercise of **human agency**, or the use of personal power to achieve one's goals. The emphasis

on human agency may be one of the most positive contributions of the life course perspective (Hareven, 2000).

A look at the discipline of social history might help to explain why considering human agency is so important to social workers. Social historians have attempted to correct the traditional focus on lives of elites by studying the lives of common people (Hareven, 2000). By doing so, they discovered that many groups once considered passive victims—for example, working-class people and slaves—actually took independent action to cope with the difficulties imposed by the rich and powerful. Historical research now shows that couples tried to limit the size of their families even in preindustrial societies (Wrigley, 1966), that slaves were often ingenious in their struggles to hold their families together (Gutman, 1976), and that factory workers used informal networks and kinship ties to manage, and sometimes resist, pressures for efficiency (Hareven, 1982a). These findings are consistent with social work approaches that focus on individual, family, and community strengths (Saleeb, 1996).

Clearly, however, human agency has limits. Individuals' choices are constrained by the structural and cultural arrangements of a given historical era. For example, Mahdi Mahdi's choices did not seem limitless to him; he faced the unfortunate choices of becoming a soldier again or refusing the draft. Unequal opportunities also give some members of society more options than others have. Elder (1998) notes that the emphasis on human agency in the life course perspective has been aided by Albert Bandura's (1986) work on the two concepts of *self-efficacy*, or sense of personal competence, and *efficacy expectation*, or expectation that one can personally accomplish a goal. It is important to remember, however, that Bandura (1986) makes specific note about how social inequalities can result in low self-efficacy and low efficacy expectations among members of oppressed groups.

Diversity in Life Course Trajectories

Life course researchers have long had strong evidence of diversity in individuals' life patterns. Early research emphasized differences between cohorts, but increasing attention is being paid to variability within cohort groups. Elder's four themes of the life course perspective are linked to the sources of both kinds of variability:

1. *Interplay of human lives and historical time.* Cohorts tend to have different life trajectories because of the unique historical events each cohort encounters. Mahdi Mahdi wanted his daughter to tell her story because he knew that he and she had experienced the war, escape, and resettlement very differently.
2. *Timing of lives.* Age norms change with time and place and culture; they also vary by social location, or place in the social structure, most notably by gender, race,

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ethnicity, and social class (Settersten & Mayer, 1997). These variables create differences from one cohort to another as well as differences among the individuals within a cohort.

3. *Linked or independent lives.* The differing patterns of social networks in which persons are embedded produce differences in life course experiences. The intersection of multiple trajectories—for example, the family lifeline, the educational lifeline, and the work lifeline—introduces new possibilities for diversity in life course patterns. Like many midlife adults, Mahdi Mahdi must find a way to balance his family lifeline, educational lifeline, and work lifeline.

4. *Human agency in making choices.* Human agency allows for extensive individual differences in life course trajectories, as individuals plan and make choices between options. It is not surprising, given these possibilities for unique experience, that the stories of individuals vary so much.

A good indication of the diversity of life course trajectories is found in an often cited study by Ronald Rindfuss and colleagues (Rindfuss et al., 1987). They examined the sequencing of five roles—work, education, homemaking, military, and other—among 6,700 men and 7,000 women for the 8 years following their high school graduation in 1972. The researchers found 1,100 different sequences of these five roles among the men and 1,800 different sequences among the women. This and other research on sequencing of life course transitions has called increasing attention to the heterogeneity of life course trajectories (Settersten, 1998; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998; Shanahan et al., 1998).

As these research results indicate, men's life course trajectories are more rigidly structured, with fewer discontinuities, than women's. One explanation for this gender difference is that women's lives have been more strongly interwoven with the family domain than men's, and the family domain operates on nonlinear time, with many irregularities (Sattersten & Lovegreen, 1998). Men's lives are still more firmly rooted in domains outside the family, such as the paid work world, and these domains operate in linear time. Men's and women's life trajectories have started to become more similar, but this convergence is primarily because women's schooling and employment patterns are moving closer to men's, and not because men have become more involved in the family domain (Sattersten and Lovegreen, 1998).

Life course trajectories also vary by social class. In neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty, large numbers of youth drop out of school by the ninth grade (Kliman & Madsen, 1999). This was the case for Jesus and Aida Suarez. In contrast, youth in upper middle-class and upper-class families expect an extended period of education with parental subsidies. These social class differences in educational trajectories are

associated with differences in family and work trajectories. Affluent youth go to school and postpone their entry into adult roles of work and family. Less affluent youth, however, often enter earlier into marriage, parenting, and employment.

Research suggests that the family life trajectories in minority groups in the United States are different from the family life trajectories of whites. Minority youth tend to leave home to live independently later than white youth do, at least in part because of the high value put on “kinkeeping” in many minority cultures (Stack, 1974). However, in a random sample from a major urban U.S. city, minority respondents gave earlier deadlines for leaving home than white respondents when questioned about the appropriate age for leaving home—even though the minority respondents actually left home at a later age than the white respondents (Sattersten, 1998). This finding may reflect the bicultural conflict that complicates the lives of young adults in ethnic minority groups. It also reflects differences in financial resources for leaving home.

Another source of diversity in a country with considerable immigration is the individual experience leading to the decision to immigrate, the journey itself, and the resettlement period (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999; Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999). The individual’s decision to immigrate may involve social, religious, or political persecution. Or, as in Mahdi Mahdi’s case, it may involve war and a dangerous political environment. The transit experience is sometimes traumatic, and Mahdi Mahdi does not like to recall his escape in the middle of the night. The resettlement experience requires establishment of new social networks, may involve changes in socioeconomic status, and presents serious demands for acculturating to a new physical and social environment. Mahdi Mahdi speaks of the struggles in being a convenience store clerk with a college education. Gender, race, social class, and age all add layers of complexity to the migration experience. Family roles often have to be renegotiated as children outstrip older family members in learning the new language. Tensions can develop over conflicting approaches to the acculturation process (Fabelo-Alcover, 2001). Just as they should investigate their clients’ educational trajectories, work trajectories, and family trajectories, social workers should be interested in the migration trajectories of their immigrant clients.

Developmental Risk and Protection

As the life course perspective has continued to evolve, it has more clearly emphasized the links between the life events and transitions of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Shanahan, 2000). Studies indicate that childhood events sometimes shape people’s lives 40 or 50 years later (George, 1996).

In fact, the long-term impact of developmental experiences was the subject of the earliest life course research, Glen Elder’s (1974) examination of longitudinal data for children from the Great Depression. He compared a group of children (referred to as the

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Oakland children) who were born in 1920 and 1921 with a group of children (referred to as the Berkeley children) who were born in 1928 and 1929. The Oakland children experienced a relatively stable and secure childhood before they encountered the economic deprivations of the Great Depression during their adolescence. They also made the transition to adulthood after the worst of the economic downturn. The Berkeley children, on the other hand, experienced early childhood during the worst years of the Depression. When they reached adolescence, their parents were involved in World War II, with many fathers away in military roles and many mothers working long hours in “essential industry.” Although both groups experienced economic hardship and later difficulties in life transitions, the Berkeley children were more negatively affected than the Oakland children.

Elder has recently more clearly enunciated the idea of developmental risk and protection as a major theme of the life course perspective: “[T]he developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events is contingent on when they occur in a person’s life” (1998, p. 3). Other life course scholars have suggested that it is not simply the timing and sequencing of hardships but also their duration and spacing that provide risk for youth as they make the transition into adulthood. For instance, poverty alone is much less of a risk than extended poverty (Shanahan, 2000). Families are more vulnerable to getting off track when confronted simultaneously by multiple events and transitions (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999b). Life course scholars have borrowed the concepts of **cumulative advantage** and **cumulative disadvantage** from sociologist Robert Merton to explain inequality within cohorts across the life course (Bartley et al., 1997; O’Rand, 1996). Merton (1968) found that in scientific careers, large inequalities in productivity and recognition had accumulated. Scholarly productivity brings recognition, and recognition brings resources for further productivity, which of course brings further recognition and so on. Merton proposed that, in this way, scientists who are productive early in their careers accumulate advantage over time, whereas other scientists accumulate disadvantage. Sociologists propose that cumulative advantage and cumulative disadvantage are socially constructed; social institutions and societal structures develop mechanisms that ensure increasing advantage for those who succeed early in life and increasing disadvantage for those who struggle (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998).

Consider the effect of advantages in schooling. Young children with affluent parents attend well-equipped primary and secondary schools, which position them for successful college careers, which position them for occupations that pay well, which provide opportunities for good health maintenance, which position them for healthy, secure old age. This trajectory of unearned advantage is sometimes referred to as **privilege** (McIntosh, 1988). Children who do not come from affluent families are more likely to attend underequipped schools, experience school failure or dropout, begin work in low-paying sectors of the labor market, experience unemployment, and arrive at old age with compromised health and limited economic resources.

Early deprivations and traumas do not inevitably lead to a trajectory of failure, but without intervention that reverses the trajectory, these early experiences are likely to lead to accumulation of disadvantage. Individual trajectories may be moderated not only by human agency but also by historical events and environmental supports. As one example of the positive impact of historical events, many children of the Great Depression were able to reverse disadvantages in their life trajectories through their military service in World War II (Elder, 1986). On the other hand, military service in wartime may involve traumatic stress, as we see with David Sanchez and Mahdi Mahdi. In terms of environmental support, governmental safety nets to support vulnerable families at key life transitions have been found to reduce the effects of deprivation and trauma on health (Bartley et al., 1997). Researchers have found that home nurse visitation during the first 2 years of a child's life can reduce the risk of child abuse and criminal behavior among low-income mothers (Olds et al., 1997).

The life course perspective and the concept of cumulative disadvantage is beginning to influence community epidemiology, or the study of the prevalence of disease across communities (e.g., Brunner, 1997; Kellam & Van Horn, 1997; Kuh & Ben-Shlomo, 1997). Researchers in this tradition are interested in social and geographical inequalities in the distribution of chronic disease. They suggest that risk for chronic disease gradually accumulates over a life course through episodes of illness, exposure to unfavorable environments, and unsafe behaviors. They are also interested in how some experiences in the life course can break the chain of risk.

This approach to public health mirrors efforts in developmental psychology and other disciplines to understand developmental risk and protective factors (Fraser, 1997; Rutter, 1996; Werner, 2000). The study of risk and protection has led to an interest in the concept of **resilience**, which refers to the ability of some people to fare well in the face of risk factors. Researchers studying resilient children are examining the interplay of risk factors and protective factors in their lives. Although the study of protective factors lags behind the study of risk factors, researchers speculate that a cumulative effect will also be found for protective factors (Fraser, 1997).

Many scholars now recommend that we think of risk and protection as processes over time, which is very much like the way that life course scholars write about life trajectories. Exhibit 1.7 shows how phases of life are interwoven with various risks and protective factors.

Strengths and Limitations of the Life Course Perspective

As a framework for thinking about the aspect of time in human behavior, the life course perspective has several advantages over traditional theories of human development. It

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EXHIBIT 1.7

Risk and Protective Factors for Specific Life Course Phases

Life Course Phase	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Infancy	Poverty Child abuse/neglect Parental mental illness Teenage motherhood	Active, alert, high vigor Sociability Small family size
Infancy-Childhood	Poverty Child abuse/neglect Divorce Parental substance abuse	"Easy," engaging temperament
Infancy-Adolescence	Poverty Child abuse/neglect Parental mental illness Parental substance abuse Teenage motherhood Divorce	Maternal competence Close bond with primary caregiver (not necessarily biological parent) Supportive grandparents
Infancy-Adulthood	Poverty Child abuse/neglect Teenage motherhood	Low distress/low emotionality Mother's education
Early Childhood	Poverty	Advanced self-help skills
Preschool-Adulthood	Poverty Parental mental illness Parental substance abuse Divorce	Supportive teachers Successful school experiences
Childhood-Adolescence	Poverty Child abuse/neglect Parental mental illness Parental substance abuse Divorce	Internal locus of control Strong achievement motivation Special talents, hobbies Positive self-concept For girls: emphasis on autonomy with emotional support from primary caregiver For boys: structure and rules in household. For both boys and girls: assigned chores Close, competent peer friends who are confidants.

(continued)

EXHIBIT 1.7Risk and Protective Factors for Specific Life Course Phases (*continued*)

Life Course Phase	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Childhood-Adulthood	Poverty Child abuse/neglect Parental mental illness Parental substance abuse Divorce	Average/above-average intelligence Ability to distance oneself Impulse control Strong religious faith Supportive siblings Mentors
Adolescence-Adulthood	Teenage parenthood Poverty	Planning, foresight

Source: Based on Werner, 2000, pp. 118-119. {PERMISSION NEEDED?}

encourages greater attention to the impact of historical and social change on human behavior, which seems particularly important in a rapidly changing society such as ours. Because it attends to biological, psychological, and social processes in the timing of lives, it is a good fit with a biopsychosocial perspective. Its emphasis on linked lives shines a spotlight on intergenerational relationships and the interdependence of lives. At the same time, with its attention to human agency, the life course perspective is not as deterministic as some earlier theories, and acknowledges people's strengths and capacity for change. Life course researchers are finding strong evidence for the malleability of risk factors and the possibilities for preventive interventions (Kellam & Van Horn, 1997). With attention to the diversity in life course trajectories, the life course perspective provides a good conceptual framework for culturally competent practice. And finally, the life course perspective lends itself well to research that looks at cumulative advantage and cumulative disadvantage, adding to our knowledge about the impact of power and privilege and suggesting strategies for social justice.

To answer questions about how people change and how they stay the same across a life course is no simple task, however. Take, for example, the question of whether there is an increased sense of generativity, or concern for others, in middle adulthood. Should the researcher study different groups of people at different ages (perhaps a group of 20-year-olds, a group of 30-year-olds, a group of 40-year-olds, a group of 50-year-olds, and a group of 60-year-olds) and compare their responses, in what is known as a cross-sectional design? Or should the researcher study the same people over time (perhaps at 10-year intervals from age 20 to age 60) and observe whether their responses stay the same or change over time, in what is known as a longitudinal design? I hope you are

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already raising the question, What happens to the cohort effect in a cross-sectional study? That is, indeed, always a problem with studying change over time with a cross-sectional design. Suppose we find that 50-year-olds report a greater sense of generativity than those in younger age groups. Can we then say that generativity does, indeed, increase in middle adulthood? Or do we have to wonder if there was something in the social and historical contexts of this particular cohort of 50-year-olds that encouraged a greater sense of generativity? Because of the possibility of cohort effects, it is important to know whether research was based on a cross-sectional or longitudinal design.

Although attention to diversity and heterogeneity may be the greatest strength of the life course perspective, heterogeneity may also be its biggest challenge. The life course perspective, like other behavioral science perspectives, searches for patterns of human behavior. But the current level of heterogeneity in countries such as the United States may well make discerning patterns impossible (George, 1993).

Another possible limitation of the life course perspective is a failure to adequately link the micro world of individual and family lives to the macro world of social institutions and formal organizations (George, 1993). Social and behavioral sciences have, historically, divided the social world up into micro and macro and studied them in isolation. The life course perspective was developed by scholars like Glen Elder Jr. and Tamara Hareven, who were trying to bring those worlds together. Sometimes, however, this effort is more successful than at other times.

Integration With a Multidimensional, Multitheoretical Approach

A companion volume to this book, *Dimensions of Human Behavior: Person and Environment*, recommends a multidimensional, multitheoretical approach for understanding human behavior. This recommendation is completely compatible with the life course perspective. The life course perspective clearly recognizes the biological and psychological dimensions of the person and can accommodate the spiritual dimension. The life course emphasis on linked or interdependent lives is consistent with the idea of the unity of person and environment presented in Volume I of this book. It can also easily accommodate the multidimensional environment (physical environment, culture, social institutions and social structure, families, small groups, formal organizations, communities, and social movements) discussed in the companion volume.

Likewise, the life course perspective is consistent with the multitheoretical approach presented in Volume I. The life course perspective has been developed by scholars across several disciplines, and they have increasingly engaged in cross-fertilization of ideas from a variety of theoretical perspectives (see, e.g., George, 1993; 1996; Kellam & Van Horn, 1997; O'Rand, 1996; Pearlin & Skaff, 1996). Because the life course can be approached from the perspective of the individual, from the perspective

EXHIBIT 1.8

Overlap of the Life Course Perspective and Eight Theoretical Perspectives on Human Behavior

Theoretical Perspective	Life Course Themes and Concepts
Systems Perspective: Human behavior is the outcome of reciprocal interactions of persons operating within organized and integrated social systems.	Theme: Timing of Lives; Linked or Interdependent Lives Concepts: Biological Age, Psychological Age, Social Age, Spiritual Age
Conflict Perspective: Human behavior is driven by conflict, dominance, and oppression in social life.	Theme: Developmental Risk and Protection Concepts: Cumulative Advantage; Cumulative Disadvantage
Rational Choice Perspective: Human behavior is based on self-interest and rational choices about effective ways to accomplish goals.	Theme: Human Agency in Making Choices Concepts: Choices; Opportunities; Constraints
Social Constructionist Perspective: Social reality is created when actors, in social interaction, develop a common understanding of their world.	Themes: Timing of Lives; Diversity in Life Course Trajectories; Developmental Risk and Protection Concepts: Making Meaning of Life Events; Social Age; Age Norms; Age Structuring; Acculturation; Cumulative Advantage and Disadvantage
Psychodynamic Perspective: Internal processes such as needs, drives, and emotions motivate human behavior; early childhood experiences are central to problems of living throughout life.	Themes: Timing of Lives; Developmental Risk and Protection Concepts: Psychological Age; Capacities; Skills
Developmental Perspective: Human behavior both changes and stays the same across the life cycle.	Themes: Interplay of Human Lives and Historical Times; Timing of Lives; Developmental Risk and Protection Concepts: Life Transitions; Biological Age, Psychological Age, Social Age, Spiritual Age; Sequencing
Social Behavioral Perspective: Human behavior is learned when individuals interact with the environment; human behavior is influenced by personal expectations and meanings.	Themes: Interplay of Human Lives and Historical Time; Human Agency in Making Choices; Diversity in Life Course Trajectories; Developmental Risk and Protection Concepts: Life Events; Human Agency
Humanistic Perspective: Human behavior can be understood only from the internal frame of reference of the individual; human behavior is driven by a desire for growth and competence.	Themes: Timing of Lives; Human Agency in Making Choices Concepts: Spiritual Age; Meaning of Life Events and Turning Points; Individual, Family, and Community Strengths

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of the family or other collectivities, or seen as a property of cultures and social institutions that shape the pattern of individual lives, it builds on both psychological and sociological theories. Exhibit 1.8 demonstrates the overlap between the life course perspective and the eight theoretical perspectives presented in Chapter 2, Volume I, of *Dimensions of Human Behavior: Person and Environment*.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The life course perspective has many implications for social work practice, including the following:

- Help clients make sense of their unique life's journeys and to use that understanding to improve their current situations. Where appropriate, help them to construct a lifeline of interlocking trajectories.
- Try to understand the historical contexts of clients' lives and the ways that important historical events have influenced their behavior.
- Where appropriate, use life event inventories to get a sense of the level of stress in a client's life.
- Be aware of the potential to develop social work interventions that can serve as turning points that help individuals, families, communities, and organizations to get back on track.
- Work with the media to keep the public informed about the impact of changing social conditions on individuals, families, communities, and formal organizations.
- Recognize the ways that the lives of family members are linked across generations and the impact of circumstances in one generation on other generations.
- Use existing research on risk, protection, and resilience to develop prevention programs.
- When working with recent immigrant and refugee families, be aware of the age norms in their countries of origin.
- Be aware of the unique systems of support developed by members of various cultural groups, and encourage the use of those supports in times of crisis.
- Support and help to develop clients' sense of personal competence for making life choices.

KEY TERMS

age norm	population pyramid
age structuring	privilege
biological age	psychological age
cohort	sex ratio
cohort effects	social age
cumulative advantage	social support
cumulative disadvantage	spiritual age
event history	trajectories
human agency	transitions
life course perspective	turning point
life event	

ACTIVE LEARNING

1. Prepare your own lifeline of interlocking trajectories (see Exhibit 1.4 for instructions). What patterns do you see? What shifts? How important are the different sectors of your life—for example, family, education, work, health?
2. One researcher found that 85% of respondents to a survey on turning points reported that there had been turning points in their lives. Interview five adults and ask whether there have been turning points in their lives. If they answer no, ask about whether they see their life as a straight path or a path with twists and turns. If they answer yes, ask about the nature of the turning point(s). Compare the events of your interviewees as well as the events in the lives of David Sanchez, Mahdi Mahdi, and Emma Suarez, with Rutter's three types of life events that can serve as turning points and Hareven's five conditions under which a transition can become a turning point.
3. Think of someone whom you think of as resilient, someone who has been successful against the odds. This may be you, a friend, coworker, family member, or a character from a book or movie. If the person is someone you know and to whom you have access, ask them to what they owe their success. If it is you or someone to whom you do not have access, speculate about the reasons for the success. How do their life journeys compare to the common risk and protective factors summarized in Exhibit 1.7?

48 The Changing Life Course**WEB RESOURCES**

Each chapter of this textbook contains a list of Internet resources and Web sites that may be useful to reader in their search for further information. Each site listing includes the address and a brief description of the contents of the site. Readers should be aware that the information contained in Web sites may not be truthful or reliable and should be confirmed before being used as a reference. Readers should also be aware that Internet addresses, or URLs, are constantly changing; therefore, the addresses listed may no longer be active or accurate. Many of the Internet sites listed in each chapter contain links to other Internet sites containing more information on the topic. Readers may use these links for further investigation.

Information not included in the Web Resources sections of each chapter can be found by using one of the many Internet search engines provided free of charge on the Internet. These search engines enable you to search using keywords or phrases, or you can use the search engines' topical listings. You should use several search engines when researching a topic, as each will retrieve different Internet sites.

GOOGLE

www.google.com

ASK JEEVES

www.askjeeves.com

YAHOO

www.yahoo.com

EXCITE

www.excite.com

LYCOS

www.lycos.com

A number of Internet sites provide information on theory and research on the life course:

Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center

www.lifecourse.cornell.edu

Site presented by the Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center at Cornell University contains information on the Center, current research, working papers, and links to work/family Web sites, demography Web sites, and gerontology Web sites.

The Finnish Twin Cohort Study

kate.pc.helsinki.fi/twin/twinhome.html

Site presented by the Department of Public Health at the University of Helsinki contains information on an ongoing project begun in 1974 to study environmental and genetic factors in selected chronic diseases with links to other related resources.

Michigan Study of Adolescent and Adult Life Transitions (MSALT)

www.rcgd.isr.umich.edu/msalt/home.htm

Site presented by the Michigan Study of Adolescent and Adult Life Transitions project contains information about the longitudinal study begun in 1983, publications on the project, and family-oriented Web resources.

Sociology and the Study of the Life Course

www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/en/forschung/bag

Site presented by the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, Germany, contains information on comprehensive research on social structure and the institutional contexts of the life course.

Life Course Project

lifecourse.anu.edu.au/lcp_info.html

Site presented by the Life Course Project of the Australian National University contains information on a longitudinal study of gender roles.

Project Resilience

www.projectresilience.com

Site presented by Project Resilience, a private organization based in Washington, D.C., contains information on teaching materials, products, and training for professionals working in education, treatment, and prevention.

