Life Course
- A Discussion of the Life Course Approach as a Frame for Research

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ISSN: 1399-4514
ISBN: 978-87-90867-41-6
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Preface

The aim of this paper is to present and discuss the life course approach to research. I do this through a presentation of the paradigmatic principles within the approach, a discussion of the links between individual life courses and structures in the society within which they unfold as well as of the consequences of modernisation for the life course of individuals. The aim of the paper is twofold. I will argue that application of the life course approach will refine the understanding of how individuals live their lives, and that the life course approach in addition provides the opportunity to understand social change.
Introduction

The life course approach to research has been referred to as ‘the pre-eminent theoretical orientation in the study of lives’ (Elder et. al. 2003:3) and in this paper, I present and discuss this approach to the study of human lives.

It is not my intention to discuss whether the life course approach as a framework for research is suitable in relation to any given event but to a larger extent to discuss the principles of the approach as such, as well as the theoretical perspective scholars working within this frame have put forward as to how the life course of individuals have changed as a consequence of the process of modernisation of society. The link between the life course and societal change is a constituent part of these discussions and is also introduced and discussed.

I start by introducing the core principles of the life course approach that steer the research within this theoretical orientation. Elder was the first to identify and, more importantly, conceptualise four key factors that determine the shape of the life course (Giele & Elder 1998:8; The original formulations in: Elder (1994)) which are now viewed as the core of this paradigm. This is, however, not the same as claiming that he was the first to advocate a longitudinal perspective on human development (see e.g. Clausen 1972) or the first to argue that the life histories of individuals and groups were of interest in sociological research. The first were in fact Thomas and Znaniecki in their study on The Polish peasant in Europe and America (1918-1920) (Elder et al. 2004:3). Elder presents and discusses however such recommendations in coherence. I start by introducing the core principles steering research within this theoretical orientation and introduce in connection hereto a number of methodological key terms that are relevant when applying the approach.

I further discuss the relation between the concept of the cohort and the concept of social change. This discussion leads to a theoretical clarification of the approach’s contribution in the task of explaining societal change. These discussions further link to the discussions on the changes in the way the life course of individuals is structured in a modernised society; discussions which constitute the third and last part of the paper.

The notion that individual life courses are structured by age norms broadens the significance of age beyond that, which is imbedded in the concept of the cohort, and plays a significant role in explaining how the life course of individuals have changed because of the process of modernisation of society. Here, the basic assumption is that the way age norms structure the life course has changed and the arguments in relation to this are presented. In the discussions as to how the life course has been transformed as a consequence of modernity, focus is on pointing to an understanding of how the life course is chronologised, institutionalised and standardised. These
discussions are contrasted with the idea of the life course as being highly *individualised*, which is discussed as well.

Through the presentation and discussion of these themes it is thus the intention to clarify the potential of the life course paradigm as an approach in research which can contribute to a greater understanding of how individuals live their lives. The life course approach has formed the theoretical background of numerous empirical studies of significant importance in relation to the theoretical orientation as such, and some of these studies show empirically the processes of change discussed in the current paper. The empirical aspects of the approach will however not be dealt with in this particular paper.

The life course approach

The life course approach is a theoretical orientation which provides a framework for research, covering *'the identification and formulation of research problems, rationales for variable selection, and strategies for research design and data analysis'* (Elder et al. 2004:4). The core idea is that one must study how people live their lives from birth to death, and, perhaps more importantly, that a life course is influenced by *‘an ever-changing historical and bibliographical context’* (Ibid., p. 7).

The life course approach has been developed from the 1960s onwards as a response to five major trends occurring during the 20th century; trends that encompass changes in history, social demography as well as scientific inquiry1 (Ibid.), of which two seem particularly interesting. The first relates to the rapidity of social change, which increased during the first half of the last century due to a number of events, e.g. the two World Wars, the Great Depression and the women’s movement, leading to a growing interest in how such social changes influence people’s life trajectories. The second aspect is related to the changes in the age structure of society, caused by declining fertility and mortality; changes that have formed the basis of an interest in how social norms regarding *‘the expectations for appropriate times and ages of important life transitions’* (Ibid., p. 6) affect and shape individuals’ live trajectories.

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1 Besides the rapidity of social change and the changing age structure of society, which I present in the text, Elder et al. argues that 1) the maturation of early child development samples, 2) changes in the composition of the U.S. and other populations, as well as 3) a revolutionary growth in longitudinal research over the last three decades also prompted the rise of *‘a vigorous era of research’* (Elder et al. 2004:5).
Five principles

Elder and co-authors explicated what was an underlying principle for the initial four core ideas, and thus formulated five core ideas in the life course paradigm: The Principles of 1) Life-Span Development, 2) Agency, 3) Time and Place, 4) Timing and 5) Linked Lives.

As for The Principle of Life-Span Development, it is stated that ‘human development and aging are lifelong processes’ (Ibid., p. 11) and the fact that in order to capture this developmental process, one must take a long-term perspective as development is not limited to childhood and early adulthood. Moreover, this long-term perspective is necessary if one wants to understand the connection between social change and individual lives, as it enhances the possibility of understanding the potential interplay between them. This principle was not one of the four key factors that Elder initially identified as determining the life course, but was posed as an underlying principle (Giele & Elder 1998:6-11).

The second principle, the Principle of Agency stresses the individuals’ ability to ‘construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance’ (Elder et al. 2004:11). Individuals are seen as active, making decisions about their life course trajectories, and it is emphasized that ‘The planning and choice-making of individuals, within the particular limitations of their world, can have important consequences for future trajectories’ (Ibid.). However, society imposes constraints on the individuals’ possibilities through norms as well as through social institutions.

The third principle highlights the connection between the life course of the individual and the context within which it unfolds. With the Principle of Time and Place, it is stressed that the lives of individuals are ‘embedded and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime’ (Ibid., p. 12). One cannot fully understand human lives unless one takes into account the historical time and place in which the life course unfolds. Not only is place a matter of geographical location, it is also ‘a material form or culture of one kind or another; an investment with meaning and value’ (Ibid.). It is stressed, however, that the same historical events and times can have different meanings across nations, and that this needs to be borne in mind.

The fourth principle, the Principle of Timing stresses that the significance of a given event is determined, amongst other things, by the timing of the event in the individual’s life course, meaning that ‘The developmental antecedents and consequences of life transitions, events, and behavioural patterns vary according to their timing in a person’s life’ (Ibid.).

Finally, it is emphasised in the Principle of Linked Lives, that ‘Lives are lived interdependently and social-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships’ (Ibid.,
Major social changes thus influence the life course of the individual at a micro-level, and the context must therefore be taken into account. Further, the people encountered in one’s life also influence the life course pathway and as changes in one life course influence others’ life courses, researchers must recognise this.

Elder and his co-authors sum up the benefits of utilising the principles as guidelines:

‘These five principles steer research away from age-specific studies and towards the recognition of individual choice and decision-making. They promote awareness of larger social contexts and history and of the timing of events and role change’ (Ibid.).

By keeping all these five principles in mind when trying to understand how people live their lives, one is able to come to a better understanding than if any one of them was left out. The scope of the principles also makes it clear that it is necessary to watch one’s step if one wishes to apply this theoretical understanding in any analysis, as it implicitly requires that many aspects need to be included in order to fully understand the life course of an individual. To make this task somewhat easier, a number of key terms have been developed, and in the following I will turn my attention to these concepts.

Key concepts

The key concepts in the life course approach have been developed exactly to capture the relation between lives and context; that is, providing ‘a way of thinking about how lives are socially organized’ (Ibid., p. 8). These concepts, Elder and co-authors argue, ‘reflect the temporal nature of lives, conveying movement through historical and bibliographical time’ (Ibid.) and they thus help to illustrate the analytic consequences of applying the life course approach.

Instead of looking at single, isolated events, it is social pathways that are the focus of study; that is, trajectories followed by individuals and groups through society. They are shaped by history and structured by social institutions, but it is emphasised that individuals have the ability to work out their own life course paths within the frames of the institutionalised pathways and normative patterns in the society of which they are members (Ibid.).

Transitions as well as the durations between them are the constituents of these social pathways, and the transitions which happen during the life course often mean a change in the individual’s role or status in society. Changes occurring because of such transitions can be both personal and social, and give great opportunity for behavioural change. Changes of a substantial nature, either to the individual itself or in society, are viewed as turning points.
When using these key terms, it seems important to be aware of the role of the context when distinguishing between transitions and turning points, as well as when trying to classify any given event; and thus to be aware of the third principle. It can be argued that the same event can be experienced as a transition in one individual’s life and as a turning point in another’s—a fact that becomes clearer if one keeps the context within which the event happens in mind. Imagine for example the event of a woman becoming a mother. If the woman is in a relationship and the child is wanted, the event can be characterised as a transition, while the same event can be characterised as a turning point if the woman is single, career-oriented, and the pregnancy initially unintended. In addition, it seems imperative to keep the age of the individuals in mind when trying to make the distinction; that is, incorporating the fourth principle too.

In addition, one must clarify the forces that lead to these transitions and turning points, and distinguish between those caused by extraneous demands as opposed to transitions and turning points caused by a deliberate decision made by the individual. In this respect, Giddens’ (1991, 1996) concept of fateful moments can be useful when trying to make such a differentiation. He defines these moments as ‘Moments at which consequential decisions have to be taken or courses of action initiated’ (Giddens 1991:243). The concept thus refers only to the moments at which an individual must make a deliberate choice; a choice that could bring about a transition or a turning point.

Brückner and Mayer (2005) argue that a proper empirical examination of life courses requires a highly detailed kind of data:

‘Ideally, one would like to be able to map all the transitions of a given birth cohort through a changing institutional structure of life states. Of particular interest are the following aspects of these transition processes: (a) prevalence, the extent to which a given transition or state occurs; (b) age variation, the degree to which transitions occur at specific ages; (c) duration variance, the extent to which people stay in a given state or stage; (d) inter-event dependency, the extent to which the occurrence of one event or state is associated with the occurrence of another event or state, and (e) sequence uniformity, the extent to which the temporal sequence and ordering of events and states are uniformly distributed’ (Ibid., p. 34-35).

Thus, the life course approach also works as a guideline on how to do research, as well as clarifying the kind of questions to ask in order to follow the approach in a stringent way. Brückner and Mayer seem to advocate the use of quantitative data material, but I find it important to supplement their wish list for ideal data with yet another point: the meaning that the individuals ascribe to the
transition processes. Such information would strengthen a given analysis with respect to at least three of the principles described above: The Principles of Life-Span Development, Agency, and Linked Lives. However, in all fairness it must be stressed that the advantages of qualitative data and methods are widely recognised within the approach (see e.g. Giele & Elder 1998).

**Social change and the concept of the cohort**

The concept of the cohort is relevant in the life course approach, as it gives an opportunity to link age and historical time when defining cohorts by birth year (Elder et al. 2004:9). By studying how different cohorts live their lives, one can come to understand social change and a clarification of the understanding of the concept of a cohort as such, as well as the discussion on its relation to social change, is therefore fruitful.

In his article on *The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change*, Ryder (1965) argues that cohorts should be seen not merely as ‘a summation of a set of individual histories’ (Ibid., p. 845) but as characterised by a distinctive composition and a set of characteristics that distinguish them from other cohorts. Cohorts are different with regards to size, racial composition and birthplace; characteristics given by birth that influence the surrounding society as the members of the cohort move through life: ‘Any extraordinary size deviation is likely to leave an imprint on the cohort as well as on the society’ (Ibid.). However, this perspective seems to be relevant mainly if one compares nations or if the time scope of one’s analysis is fairly grand, as it could be argued that the changes in the characteristics of race, birthplace and size within a country are fairly small from one year (interval) to the next (interval).

Furthermore, Ryder argues, each new cohort ‘makes fresh contact with the contemporary social heritage and caries the impress of the encounter through life’ (Ibid., p. 844). Taken together, this means that each cohort is a possible intermediary in social change. They do not cause it; they permit it (Ibid.). Cohorts are not viewed as homogeneous, but differentiated with regard to education, occupation, marital status, parity status etc. (Ibid., p. 847). This makes it relevant to combine an inter-cohort analysis with a cross-classification of some of their characteristics, since ‘rarely are changes so localized in either age or time that their burden falls exclusively on the shoulders of one cohort’ (Ibid.).

Society is defined as persisting independently of its members, and ‘continually receiving raw material through fertility and discharging depleted resources by mortality’ (Ibid., p. 844). This continual exchange in the composition of the members of society ‘compensate the society for
limited individual flexibility’ (Ibid., p. 855). Change is thus viewed as a consequence of this flow of new members having characteristics that the surrounding society must take into account, making changes that influence not only the specific cohort but also society itself. The point is, further, that the imprint of these changes is carried through life, thus distinguishing the particular cohort from previous and later cohorts.

Ryder’s article was published in the mid-1960s and based on an analysis of a society that seems quite different from societies of today where the idea of ‘limited individual flexibility’ would seem to be a little out of date. In addition, he seems to focus primarily on structural explanations when accounting for change. This makes one wonder whether his view on flexibility at the level of the individual as limited is tantamount to him being unwilling to accept more recent ideas on the individualisation of the life course. I will return to these notions below.

Social change has different impact on people of different age. This implies that one can come to a better understanding of the impact of a given change by studying how it has influenced cohorts that differed in age when the change occurred (Elder et al. 2004:9). It is therefore necessary to distinguish between cohort effects and period effects. When historical change differentiates the lives of successive birth cohorts, it generates a cohort effect, while history takes the form of a period effect when the impact of social change is relatively uniform across successive birth cohorts (Giele & Elder 1998:22-25; Elder et al. 2004).

As a cohort of individuals ages ‘they develop biologically, psychologically, and socially: they move through the stages of family life, school grades, career trajectories, into retirement and ultimate death. They are continually being reallocated to new sets of roles and resocialized to perform them’ (Riley 1987:4). Riley stresses that this process occurs partly by individual choice, partly by rules and mechanisms governing the sequence of roles within the social structure.

Because society changes different cohorts do not age in the same way. This principle is connected to the change mentioned above that initially led to an emphasis on life course studies: the change in the age structure of populations. Further, with a change in mortality patterns, a larger part of a given cohort can expect to live to older ages: ‘This remarkable extension of longevity has untold consequences for the shape of the life course and the ways life is experienced in a range of intermediate social structures’ (Ibid., p. 7). This influences both the time spent on education, the duration of life after retirement, as well as the role relationships in the family.

Individual ageing and social change influence each other through ‘the intricate layers of the social system’ (Ibid.). One must, however, also be aware that even if ageing and social change are two interdependent dynamics, this does not mean that they happen at the same pace. Each process
happens at its own pace and while the individuals in a cohort age ‘according to a rhythm set by the approximate current length of the human lifetime’ (Ibid., p. 5), changes in society do not in the same way happen with any periodicity. Rather, it ‘is influenced by imbalances, strains, and conflicts within the age stratification system, as well as by external social and environmental events or evolutionary changes in the organism’ (Ibid.). It is important to be aware of this lack of synchrony and not only focus on changes at the level of individuals:

‘More salient for many people undergoing a transition may be the changes that occur, not in their personal lives, but around them in the environing social structures. (...) When familiar structures of family, work, and community are altered, individuals must continually adapt their lives to new norms and new expectations’ (Ibid., p. 9).

Riley’s perspective on the individuals as members of both cohorts and society is slightly more dynamic than Ryder’s. There seems in Ruley’s mind to be a bit more room for individual flexibility, just as she, to a larger degree than Ryder, allows some scope for individuals to execute agency, and for the possibility that this in turn affects the process of social change.

A key element in the discussions on how structures influence the individual is that age norms have a significant influence on the way the life course is shaped. I therefore present these ideas prior to the discussions on the structuring of the life course.

**Age norms**

The concept of the birth cohort is significant in the life course approach as it makes it possible to link age and historical time. At the same time, age is relevant in its own right in relation to an analysis of the life course as ‘Age is not only a general rubric for the consequences, rewards and penalties of experience; it is an important basis for role allocation in every society’ (Ryder 1965:846). Both formal and informal age-specific norms influence how the life course is shaped, as in any given society there are some joint conceptions of what Neugarten (1969) called a ‘”normal, expectable life cycle,” ideas about the seasons of life and the markers within and between them’ (Settersten 2004:85).

Formal opinions of age form the basis of the way the family, the educational system and the labour market are organised at the societal level; if not directly then implicitly, based on an idea about the content in life in different periods of the life course. Settersten introduces the academic discussions on age norms as structuring the life course in his contribution to the *Handbook of the Life Course* (2004) and argues that there seems to be a tendency towards looser age-structured
expectations with regard to the educational systems and the labour market. In a modernised society, where it is a necessity that people retain a focus on learning and training for work throughout their entire working life, age tends to lose some of its relevance in these spheres (Ibid., p. 82).

In addition, he notes that the family seems to be less structured by age than the educational and the work spheres (Ibid., p. 83). However, the latter two spheres have a significant influence on the organisation of the family sphere, and it could thus be argued that in spite of a low degree of direct structuring by age in this sphere, age has a strong indirect impact on the organisation of the family sphere.

Settersten argues that family forms and sequences to a large extent are complex, different and much less predictable, and at the same time ‘The family is also considered relatively private and not as legitimately controlled by the state, though many aspects of family life clearly are subject to regulation and intervention’ (Ibid.). Informal norms seem to exist to a larger degree when formal regulations are minimal. One could argue, further and at least in relation to the part of the family sphere concerning childbearing and -rearing since in particular women’s fertility is strongly regulated by biological age, that the need for other regulation by means of social age is not as necessary as in other parts of the individual’s life where biological age poses little or no strain.

At the individual level, age is used as a guideline in the organisation of one’s own and others’ lives in an informal way (Ibid., p. 81). Elder has described this as ‘the concept of social clocks, or normative timetables, which refer to the expectations for appropriate times and ages of important life transitions’ (Elder et al. 2004:6).

Some of the expectations about appropriate ages are based on formal regulations and policies, e.g. right to vote, drive, have consensual sex, and stand trial while others are based on observed, statistical patterns, like height and weight relative to what is expected on a normal curve, or on ‘informal and shared ideas about the timing of transitions, such as when schooling or childbearing are to be finished or when children are to have left home’ (Settersten 2004:85).

It seems that these discussions would benefit from a more clear-cut distinction between different types of age. Birren’s (1968) discussion of four different concepts of age: chronological age, biological age, psychological age and social age, presents relevant concepts in this context; concepts which make clear that an understanding of age as solely chronological age as determined by time of birth is inadequate.

Biological age refers to the stage in the ageing process of the body itself, and this concept is thus highly relevant in particular in relation to female fertility where the menopause poses a natural
endpoint for childbearing. At the same time, this understanding of age also seems to be the basis of some of the expectations based on observed, statistical patterns.

Psychological age refers to the *age-related adaptive capacities* of the individual. This type of age is thus a rather more abstract concept, as is social age. Birren defines social age as ‘referring to acquired social habits and status – to the individual’s filling the many social roles or expectancies of a person of his age in his culture or social group’ (Ibid., p. 547). These latter understandings of psychological and social age correspond with the notion that some expectations about appropriate ages for given transitions are based on shared ideas. However, the distinction between psychological and social age is not as clear-cut in Settersten’s understanding of what forms the basis of such shared ideas as the distinction Birren makes. In addition, one might rightfully argue that also the majority of formal regulations and policies are largely based on an understanding of both psychological and social age, in the sense that an overall impression of psychological and social abilities at a given (chronological) age forms the basis of formal role allocation as well.

In demography, the observed statistical patterns and regularities regarding a number of transitions have been explained by the concepts of age norms or age normativity (Settersten 2004:85), and at least four (not necessarily mutually exclusive) explanations have been posed in order to explain such regularities. Two of them have been emphasised in sociology, and it is those two I will concentrate on.

The first of these explanations is related to the idea that socially determined conditions impose constraint on individuals, and that this gives them different opportunities and constraints in different age groups (Ibid., p. 86). With a reference to Ryder’s before-mentioned notion that cohorts are differentiated with regard to a number of characteristics, some given by birth and some not, one could add that it appears to be important to include also differences in life course trajectories within age groups and not just focus on differences between age groups as homogenous groups. This would ease the task of distinguishing between the structural conditions related to age and the structural conditions that create different opportunities for people in the same age group but differentiated concerning other characteristics.

The second explanation focuses on the existence of informal social norms that determine and regulate experiences. In sociology, this explanation has formed the basis of ‘a theoretical interest in how age is central for social organization and the maintenance of social order. The essence of sociological theorizing about age norms is tied to social prescriptions and proscriptions governing the timing of transitions’ (Ibid.). Settersten argues that this explanation constitutes a problem, and
for two reasons: Firstly, because statistical regularities are not necessarily ‘socially normative’, and secondly, because social norms have not been measured by researchers (Ibid.).

Informal social norms can be defined, as sociologists do, by identifying the three components that they consist of:

‘First, they are prescriptions for, or proscriptions against, engaging in certain behaviours and taking on certain roles. Second, there is consensus about these rules. And, third, these rules are enforced through various mechanisms of social control, particularly positive sanctions to keep people ‘on track,’ and negative sanctions to bring ‘back into line’ those individuals who stray from these tracks’ (Ibid.).

In order for an informal age-based norm system to have any leverage, it is imperative that individuals are aware of the sanctions and consequences related to breaching such norms, and at the same time that they are impressionable to social approval and disapproval. The problem, Settersten argues, is that researchers have failed to include the third aspect of the understanding of informal social norms: the consequences individuals experience themselves or impose on others who do not follow the existing norms (Ibid., p. 87-88).

One could, however, argue that in a modernised society where the individual is the sole bearer of the consequences of any wrong decisions made regarding which paths to follow, such sanctions and consequences are no longer necessary.

Nonetheless, there seems to be consensus among demographers and sociologists about the idea that social norms give meaning to and direct individual trajectories (Elder et al. 2004:6), and that ‘..norms are ’internalized’ through socialization processes that incorporate ‘collective-cultural’ meanings into individual consciousness, meanings which become so ingrained that they seem part of nature itself’ (Settersten 2004:86). This does not, however, mean that norms pose an unchangeable meaning, as changes in social norms happen due to both the impact of the broader contexts in which they are embedded as well as the impact of the aggregation of lives that follow these pathways (Elder et al. 2004:8).

In 1965, Neugarten and co-authors found ‘that a set of age expectations underlie adult life, and that men and women are aware of the social clocks that operate in their lives and of their own timing in relation to them’ (Settersten 2004:87). One might expect that such age expectations would have lost their importance in the half of a century that has passed since then, as society is now characterised by modernity in its most extreme form. However, Settersten refers to two later studies, from 1975 and 1981 respectively, that reach the same conclusions as Neugarten and co-
authors: that such expectations do indeed still exist, but that ‘individuals not only advocate later ages for most transitions, but a wider range of ages’ (Ibid.).

In a study from the mid-1990s, Settersten, in collaboration with Hagestad (1996, 1996, Settersten 1998), finds that there seems to be more expectations about deadlines for transitions related to the family sphere, where the level of formal regulation is low, than is the case in relation to the educational and work spheres. In addition, transition deadlines more often apply to men than women, indicating that ‘men’s lives are (or are perceived as) more rigidly structured by age, while women’s lives are (or are perceived as) more fluid, unpredictable, and discontinuous’ (Ibid., p. 91). However, this is not the case regarding fertility, where the deadlines are more often given in relation to women’s fertility than men’s.

**Consequences for the structuring of the life course**
The historical shifts in how age structures the life course have given rise to a number of different perspectives on the consequences of this structuring. In the following I discuss the ideas of the *chronologisation*, *institutionalisation* and *standardisation* of the life course respectively as these concepts point to significant changes in the life course of individuals. In addition, some life course scholars argue that there is yet another process happening: the *individualisation* of the life course. Special emphasis is put on discussing this latter process and its connections to theoretical notions on the modernised society as presented by sociologists Berger and co-authors (1974) and Giddens (1991).

**Chronologisation**
The concept of *chronologisation* asserts the idea that age and time have become distinct dimensions in the life of individuals due to a number of changes in the early part of the 20th century, e.g. advances in science and communication (Settersten 2004:84).

According to Guillemard (2001), the ‘advent of industrial society closely tied into the emergence of a threefold organization of the life course’ (Ibid., p. 2) with life divided into childhood and youth as a time for education, adulthood as a time for work, and old age as a time for retirement. The life of an individual is thus divided into separate phases, distinguished by age, and each with a significant activity endowing it with meaning and identity. The chronologisation of the life course is thus seen as a process where life events are becoming more and more tied to age, in the sense that
social expectations, rights and duties are linked to or defined by reference to chronological age. Legal ages defining the time to start and leave school and the time to retire are examples hereof.

**Institutionalisation**

The allocation of roles and duties by means of chronological age is strongly linked to the process of *institutionalisation* of the life course, where advocates argue (see e.g. Kohli & Meyer 1986, Kohli 2007) that the life course is to a large extent structured by institutions and by the state through structural organisation and through the allocation of resources (Settersten 2004:84). As the individual has been freed from a long line of traditional forms of social control, the state has come to regulate life to a larger extent than was the case in traditional societies (Ibid.).

In line with Settersten, Guillemard argues that the development of the welfare state and its social policies, which to a large extent assign rights and duties to individuals based on chronological age, has helped to construct and define the above-mentioned three periods of time, thus gradually institutionalising the life course. She formulates the role of the welfare state in the following manner:

> ‘In particular, it has distributed social rights, duties and activities by organizing the triangular relations between family, work and school into an orderly model of successive stages. Each age in the life course has been associated with a distinct activity that endows it with meaning and identity’ (Guillemard 2001:2-3).

In the latter part of this quote, Guillemard points to the connection between social norms about appropriate ages for life course transitions and formal regulations, as discussed above. Social norms and their connection with conceptions of social age are thus seen in formal regulations as expressed by reference to chronological age. Institutionalisation thus refers to the process through which social activities are ordered throughout the life course, by means of designating rights and obligations regarding these social activities to the individual on the basis of chronological age.

**Standardisation**

As a consequence of institutionalisation as well as of chronologisation, the life course has become *standardised* Settersten claims (2004:84). *Standardisation* refers to the development of regularity in life courses, and the concept is used to capture how the life course has become both ordered and predictable (Shanahan 2000:669).

Guillemard argues, as does Settersten, that the chronologisation of the life course also contributes towards and drives the process of standardisation of the life course:
‘At the same age, everyone moves quite predictably from one phase to the next. Entering the world of work occurs at the same age for nearly everyone with an equivalent level of education. And the retirement age sets the date when everyone will stop working’ (Guillemard 2001:3).

Standardisation can be viewed as a process that happens within cohorts, but there also seems to be evidence supporting the notion that standardisation happens over time and thus between cohorts. The process of institutionalisation could be viewed as evidence hereof, at least as long as chronological age is used to assign rights and duties to the individual through social policies and deadlines within these social policies which do not change significantly.

The ideas of the life course being chronologised, institutionalised and standardised are useful if one wants to grasp the life course as it unfolds in cohorts and how the life course changes over a (fairly) long period of time. At the same time, one must pay attention to the details of how the life course unfolds at the level of individuals in order to fully comprehend the diversity with which they organise and live their lives. I therefore present the idea that the life course has to a large extent become individualised, and that transitions in the life course can be seen as part of a developmental process.

Individualisation and development

Like the processes of chronologisation, institutionalisation and standardisation, the process of individualisation of the life course has been understood as a consequence of the modernisation of societies that happened during the 20th century.

Emphasis in the argument is put on a tendency towards ‘increased variability in the sequencing and overlap of transitions’ (Shanahan 2000:670), an increasing overlap between transition markers from different spheres (Guillemard 2001:4) and a tendency to increasing overlaps between ‘familial and nonfamilial transition markers’ (Shanahan 2000:670). These changes have in addition led scholars to argue that the life course has become de-standardised (see e.g. Mayer 1986, 2000, Brückner & Mayer 2005 and Elzinga & Liefbroer 2007), as can be seen in ‘the crumbling of the modernist, three-phase life course model’ (Vinken 2007:10).

In line with these arguments of greater variability, Settersten notes that it is possible for individuals in a modern society to pursue dreams about work, education, and pleasure throughout their life course and that such dreams are no longer attached to the idea about a threefold life course. It is possible for the individual to adjust dreams and obligations in one sphere in order to be
able to meet the demands present in another life sphere (Settersten 2004:84), and the life course ‘is becoming more flexible with a diversity of phases’ (Guillemard 2001:2).

Most of the arguments as to why the life course has become individualised are related to the idea that family and traditions no longer seem to have an influence on how people live their lives; a perspective I return to below. However, Guillemard also connects the individualisation of the life course to changes in the organisation of work: ‘Changes in work, related to the decline of Fordism and the emergence of an information-intensive economy and knowledge-based society, have disorganized this orderly arrangement of ages with activities’ (Ibid.). The consequence is, according to Shanahan, that ‘Within the framework of a highly predictable life course, people are able to improvise considerably in the planning of their lives’ (Shanahan 2000:671). It is my impression that this formulation of the discrepancies is rather broad and, as a consequence, somewhat vague. It does, however, point to the paradox in the fact that the processes of standardisation and individualisation is thought of as happening simultaneously. It is thus not a matter of one process occurring after and thus as a reaction of the other, but rather, modernisation is thought of as promoting both standardisation and individualisation (Ibid.). Brückner and Mayer (2005) do indeed argue that it is imperative to try to disentangle the concepts used to explain changes in the life course and stress that the processes the concepts here presented aim to describe ‘do not need to go all in the same direction. For instance, it is possible that institutionalization is coupled with de-standardization [...] or that pluralization might go hand in hand with standardization’ (Ibid., p. 34). Consequently, the processes must be assumed to be occurring simultaneously and perhaps in different directions, making it impossible to make grand generalisations about overall trends (Ibid.).

As the life course patterns which were given in traditional societies dissolve, the life course becomes not only flexibly organised but also ‘experienced’ (Settersten 2004:84). This has made life course scholars introduce the ideas of sociologists, e.g. Beck (1986, 1997) and Giddens (1990, 1991, and 1996) and their notions on how the process of modernisation poses significant strain on the individual. In a modernised society, individuals are to a large extent able to ‘exercise more agency in the construction of their biographies’ (Shanahan 2000:670), and thus the life course becomes a deliberate project. At the same time, this highlights the significance of including a view on the transitions into adulthood as part of a developmental process.

In addition, this perspective makes relevant Giddens’ understanding of identity and in particular how the biographies must incorporate and create a link between the past, present and future in order for people to appear as authentic - both to themselves and to others (Giddens
The reflexivity characterising a modernised society influences the notion of self in the sense that it ‘has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change’ (Giddens 1991:33). Identity is thus not given by tradition or kinship, nor is a person’s identity

‘to be found in behaviour, nor - important though this is - in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual’s biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing ‘story' about the self’ (Ibid., p. 54).

In order for people to appear as believable - both in relation to themselves and to others - the narrative must include a notion of ‘who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going’ 2 (Ibid.) and thus incorporate and create a link between the past, present and future.

This notion of identity is very similar to the understanding of identity presented by Berger and co-authors, who define identity as ‘the manner in which individuals define themselves’ (Berger et al. 1974:73) and thus as 'the actual experience of self in a particular social situation’ (Ibid.).

Settersten’s view on the life course as experienced also highlights the significance of the concept of life plans as introduced by Berger and co-authors in an attempt to explain how the individual copes with the challenges posed by the modernisation of society. They emphasise life planning as the task through which the individual ascribes meaning to its own biography. The life plan thus works as a primary source of identity, as the individual, when doing long-range planning, not only plans what he will do but also who he wants to be (Ibid., p. 70-71). Giddens refers to this notion of life planning (Giddens 1991:80-88) but emphasises the connection between this concept and the term lifestyle; the latter concept covering something more fundamental than the consumer culture (Ibid., p. 81). Berger and co-authors’ concept of life planning puts the emphasis on the connection between the choices made and the individual’s notion of who he wants to become in a life-long perspective. It thus underlines the significance of a strong link between the past, present and future in the choices that the individual makes.

Both Berger and co-authors and Giddens point to the diminishing significance ascribed to tradition as a guide for the individual in pre-modern societies as being one of the reasons why individuals in a modernised society are forced to make use of life plans or lifestyles. As individuals

2 This particular formulation is actually not Giddens’ but Charles Taylor’s in Taylor C (1989). Sources of Self. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
are faced with a large number of alternative life careers, they are forced to choose between these different options. Whereas life careers, and hence an unambiguous foundation for the individual’s identity, were traditionally given by means of tradition, thus structuring life within established frameworks (Berger et al. 1974:66-69, Giddens 1991:80-82), in a modern society they are relatively open to the individual, and the individual is therefore aware of and able to imagine different future biographies. On the one hand, the many opportunities give individuals the feeling that at least to some extent they can determine the contents of their life career. On the other hand, the individual always faces the danger of feeling frustration, regret and even shame if it turns out that it would had been more rewarding to choose differently in the past, or if there appear to have been opportunities not fully exploited. In addition to this, there is the feeling of frustration if something is thought to limit or prohibit the individual’s sense and feeling of freedom (Berger et al. 1974:66-69).

Individual choices, Berger and co-authors argue, are based on a more or less realistic knowledge about possible and impossible life plans, which all relate to different time horizons and institutional spheres. Giddens agrees and refers to this aspect of Berger and co-authors’ arguments in order to account for the many possibilities facing the individual (Ibid., p. 83). They elaborate on the arguments on the connections between the different life careers and argue that they are interdependent in the sense that one choice affects the others, giving life planning ‘a calculuslike complexity’ (Berger et al. 1974:72). In addition, the life plan is under constant revision; ‘an on going reinterpretation of the past’ (Ibid., p. 69-70). Berger and co-authors point out, as does Giddens that the individual’s process of ascribing meaning to its own biography cannot be carried out in a vacuum, as

‘this meaning-giving must be related to overarching meanings of society [...]. As the individual plots the trajectory of his life on the social 'map', each point in his projected biography relates him to the overall web of meanings in the society. Life planning is the overarching activity par excellence’ (Ibid., p. 73).

These notions thus emphasise that structures in society pose strains on the individual, and that this has an influence on the individual’s ability to choose a life plan and construct a coherent sense of self-identity. However, Guillemard argues that such planning is impossible, due to the individuals’ uncertainties (Guillemard 2001:5).

As Berger and co-authors, Settersten argues that the individual is forced to face the consequences of the choices made. In addition, he unfolds the consequences if the choices made turn out to be wrong. With a reference to Beck (2000) he notes that ‘The experimental nature of ‘do-it-yourself’ biographies makes them prone to biological slippage and collapse’ (Settersten 2004:84). Settersten
links this discussion to the question of whether, and if so how, age norms shape and influence the life course of individuals and sets off exploring how ‘the strong ethos of individualism typical of modern societies may lead individuals to regulate themselves and others only loosely, if at all’ (Ibid., p. 86). Focused on the transition to adulthood and with a reference to the threefold understanding of social norms as I have presented it above, he finds that the importance of age deadlines is strongly connected to the idea of development and utilisation of one’s potential at the individual level. In addition, he finds no indication of the existence of any sanctions if people fail to go through a given transition within the age span set in the age norms. Thus, there seems to be a discrepancy between, on the one hand, the clear expectations as to when people are supposed to have gone through any given transition and the belief that transitions are important for the individual to develop and evolve, and on the other hand the lack of any developmental loss if someone fails to meet the deadlines. He concludes:

‘Individuals’ visions of the life course are complex, diverse, and flexible. Above all, they find it imperative to ‘live a life of their own,’ (...). Timetables that are self-constructed and self-imposed prevail over general cultural timetables’ (Ibid., p. 91).

It is however, he argues, important to note that individuals seem to believe that a concordance between personal and cultural time tables makes it easier to navigate in life, thus making development easier as well. And there is room for personal time tables: ‘Individuals approach age deadlines as flexible developmental markers that guide the life course, not as widely shared and firmly enforced age norms that dictate it’ (Ibid.).

Conclusions
In this paper I have presented and discussed the life course approach to research.

The five paradigmatic principles comprehend the complexity likely to be encountered when one sets off trying to understand the life course. Combined with the key terms, one is well-equipped with practicable tools as well. Regarding the integrated discussions about the significance of age, both as a characteristic with which to identify cohorts and as a basis for role allocation and age norms, this double perspective is advantageous, not only as a guideline for how to choose and define one’s group of interest, but also as a way to keep in mind how life courses are determined also by social structures within society. This latter aspect also highlights what I find to be one of this approach’s main advantages: The recognition that life courses are intertwined and that
individuals do not live their lives in a vacuum, but are influenced by others; and not only by the people they encounter directly but also through the expectations embedded in social norms.

It is the five core principles of the life course approach in conjunction that provide the understanding of the interconnection between human action and the social world in which it takes place. The choice of the life course paradigm as the frame for study thus implies a view of the life course as a process which, on the one hand, is constrained by the structures of the surrounding society but within which the individual, on the other hand, is able to exert a certain degree of agency.

A key element in the theoretical perspectives concerning the characteristics of a modernised society and its impact on the lives of individuals as well as on self-identity is that the process of modernisation has a unique influence on the individual’s identity, and here the connection to sociological notions of the theoretical perspectives of modernisation are clear. As pointed out, scholars working within the life course tradition have focused primarily on the significance of age norms for the structuring of the life course, causing it to be chronologised, institutionalised and standardised. Simultaneously, the process of individualisation means that the life course becomes a matter of doing biography, causing a greater variability in the life course of individuals. The arguments are thus largely based on the idea that social norms work as structural strains on, but also as guides for individuals in the organisation of their life course, but that the significance of such norms has changed. They no longer exercise the same control and act guidance as in traditional societies, which cause increased individualisation of the life course, thus making the ideas of e.g. Berger and co-authors and Giddens relevant.

It is thus emphasised that structures in society pose strains on the individual, and that this has an influence on the individual’s ability to choose a life plan and construct a coherent sense of self-identity. In spite of this recognition, the overall emphasis is placed on the individual’s ability to choose. Following this the life course approach is based primarily on an understanding of the life course as constructed by and an expression of deliberate decisions made by the individual. The individual is faced with numerous options and forced to make decisions on these.

The discussions of the structuring of the life course thus form a link between the life course approach as the frame for research and the sociological notions of the consequences of modernity. At the same time, they can provide a link between the sociological understanding of society and perspectives on changes in the structuring of demographic events throughout the life course favoured by demographers, see e.g. Blenstrup (2010). The understanding within the life course paradigm of the interplay between individual action and the structure in the society within which
such action takes place establishes the framework for additional theoretical notions to be applied in a given study. The application of the life course approach has however consequences for not only the theoretical components, but also the methodological and analytical strategies in an empirical study. Further, it provides guidance on the requirements one must make regarding the data used in analysis.

References


