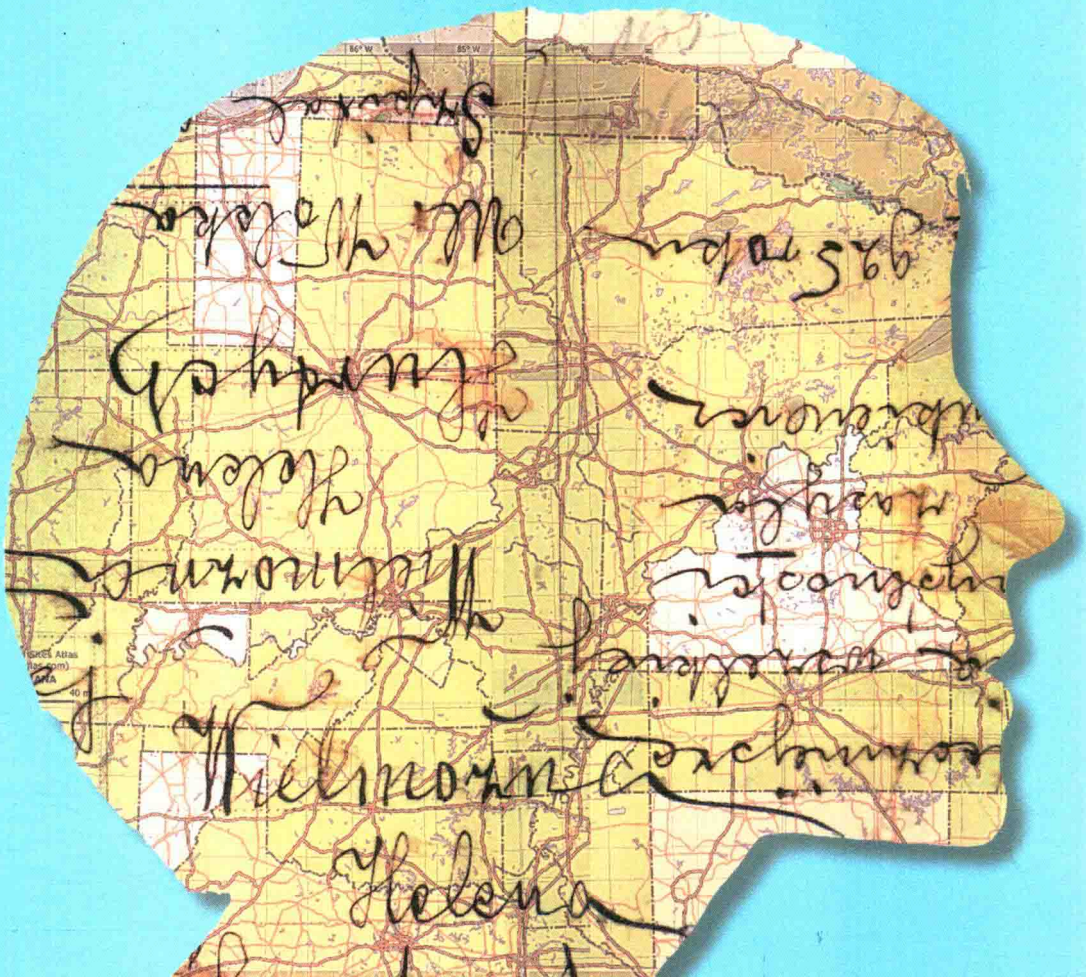
RESEARCHING THE LIFECOURSE

Critical reflections from the social sciences

Edited by
Nancy Worth and Irene Hardill



RESEARCHING THE LIFECOURSE

Critical reflections from the social sciences

Edited by Nancy Worth and Irene Hardill

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by

Policy Press
University of Bristol
1-9 Old Park Hill
Bristol
BS2 8BB
UK
t: +44 (0)117 954 5940
pp-info@bristol.ac.uk
www.policypress.co.uk

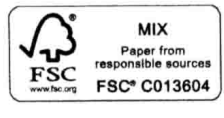
North America office:
Policy Press
c/o The University of Chicago Press
1427 East 60th Street
Chicago, IL 60637, USA
t: +1 773 702 7700
f: +1 773 702 9756
sales@press.uchicago.edu
www.press.uchicago.edu

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 978 1 44731 752 4 hardcover

Cover design by Policy Press
Front cover image: Hondartza Fraga, www.hondartzafraga.com
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
Policy Press uses environmentally responsible print partners



For my family (NW)

For Ian (IH)

List of tables and figures

Tables

Figures

Notes on contributors

Bree Akesson is assistant professor of social work at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada, as well as treatment facilitator for the Child Psychiatric Epidemiology Group. Her current research is focused on the effects of political violence on young children and their families. She is co-editor of the forthcoming book *Children Affected by Armed Conflict: Theory, Method, and Practice* published by Columbia University Press.

Anne Leonora Blaakilde is associate professor at Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. She is a folklorist, working with migration, family, and gender in a lifecourse perspective. She recently co-edited with Gabriella Nilsson *Nordic Seniors on the Move. Mobility and Migration in Later Life*, Lund Studies in Arts and Cultural Sciences. Since 2004 she has been the editor of the Danish journal *Gerontologi*.

Sophie Bowlby is visiting professor in geography at Loughborough University and honorary research fellow in geography and environmental science at the University of Reading, UK. She is a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. Her research has focused on feminist analysis of issues of access, employment and social relationships of informal care in time-space. Her recent research has focused on care, friendship and social inclusion among children and young people and also among women in their fifties.

Ann Del Bianco is an adjunct professor in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University in Toronto, Canada. Her recent past appointment was a senior researcher in the field of occupational cancer. Ann's publications and research interests are in the areas of: alternative methodological approaches, the lifegrid, oesophageal cancer, environmental and occupational cancer, cancer prevention, and environmental and ecosystem health.

Françoise Dureau is honorary research director in geography and demography, member of the laboratory Migrinter (International Migration: Space and Societies), Université de Poitiers, France. Her work focuses on practices of spatial mobility and transformation of urban spaces. She has published or co-published 15 books, including: *Métropoles en mouvement* (Anthropos); *L'accès à la ville: les mobilités spatiales en questions* (L'Harmattan); *Les mondes de la mobilité* (Presses

Universitaires de Rennes); *Mobilités et changement urbain: Bogotá, Santiago et São Paulo* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes).

Rosalind Edwards is professor of sociology, social sciences director of research and enterprise, and a co-director of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods at the University of Southampton, UK. She is a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. Ros is co-editor of the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, and has written about qualitative and mixed methods. She has published widely in the field of family studies, with her most recent book being *Understanding Families Over Time: Research and Policy* for Palgrave Macmillan.

Bisola Falola is a PhD candidate in the Department of Geography and the Environment at the University of Texas at Austin (USA). Her current research examines social and spatial mobility with urban minority youth. Her work also focuses on examining youth geographies and young people's transitions to adulthood in the Global North and South. She is also interested in examining emotional and affective geographies, futurity and landscapes of the future and in conducting urban ecological research, particularly on issues related to ecological gentrification.

Matthieu Giroud is assistant professor in geography at Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée (France), and member of the laboratory Analyse Comparée des Pouvoirs. His work focuses on popular continuities in neighbourhoods undergoing gentrification. He has co-edited many publications including *Les mobilités spatiales dans les villes intermédiaires. Territoires, pratiques, régulations* (Presses universitaires Blaise Pascal) or *Métropoles en débat. (Dé)constructions de la ville compétitive* (Presses universitaires de Paris Ouest).

John Goodwin is professor of sociology at the University of Leicester, UK. John has expertise in qualitative secondary analysis, restudies, biographical methods and the use of unconventional data sources in sociological research. He has published widely in areas such as youth transitions, work and employment and the history of sociology.

Irene Hardill is professor of public policy and director of the Northumbria Centre for Citizenship and Civil Society, Northumbria University, UK. She has a particular expertise in volunteering and the voluntary and community sector, demography and ageing, and knowledge exchange and user engagement. Recent books include

Enterprising Care: Unpaid Voluntary Action in the 21st Century for Policy Press with Dr Sue Baines (MMU, UK) and *Knowledge Mobilisation and the Social Sciences* for Routledge with Jon Bannister.

Christophe Imbert is assistant professor in geography, Université de Poitiers (France), and member of the laboratory Migrinter (International Migration: Space and Societies). He has co-edited the publication *D'une métropole à l'autre: pratiques urbaines et circulations dans l'espace européen* (Armand Colin). He's working on settlement patterns in France and Portugal and their relationships with lifestyles dynamics.

Melissa Kelly is a postdoctoral fellow in the Narrative Study of Lives Programme in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Free State in South Africa. She has published several book chapters and journal articles on migration decision making, identity and belonging. Her current research considers how life history narratives can be used to understand the experiences of highly skilled cross-border migrants in South Africa.

Jane Yeonjae Lee is a postdoctoral fellow at the Humanities Center at Northeastern University, USA, working on the *Living in the Mobility Transition* research project under her supervisor Tim Cresswell. Jane's PhD thesis examined the everyday lives of Korean New Zealander returnees. Her research interests and publications surround topics of migration and mobilities, national/ethnic identities, religion, and health.

Rose Lindsey is based in the division of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology at the University of Southampton, UK. She is the principal investigator for an ESRC-funded project on 'Continuity and Change in Volunteering 1981-2012' for which she is writing a co-authored book entitled *Continuity and Change in Voluntary Action* for Policy Press. She is also principal investigator for another ESRC-funded project on 'Defining Mass Observation', a longitudinal mixed-method project that aims to increase knowledge of the Mass Observation Project's volunteer writers.

Elizabeth Metcalfe currently works as a quantitative researcher on the ESRC funded project 'Continuity and Change in Volunteering 1981-2012', based in the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences at the University of Southampton, UK. She is a co-author for a forthcoming book entitled *Continuity and Change in Voluntary Action*. Following this

project, she will undertake a position as a statistical analyst at the Office of National Statistics. Elizabeth's PhD from the University of Leeds was a mixed-method project that explored how 'place' influences acute coronary syndrome outcome among older people.

Bren Neale is professor of life course and family research in the School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds (UK) and a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. She specialises in research on the dynamics of family life and intergenerational relationships and has published widely in this field. As director of ESRC *Timescapes*, Bren has supported the development of qualitative longitudinal (QL) research across academia and in government and NGO settings.

Henrietta O'Connor is professor of sociology at the Department of Sociology, University of Leicester, UK. Her current work is based on analysis of qualitative data, qualitative longitudinal research and community restudies. Henrietta has particular expertise on paradata, marginalia and fieldnotes. She has published extensively on Internet methods, youth and work.

Kaisa Schmidt-Thomé holds a licentiate in planning geography at the University of Helsinki (Finland) and works as a research fellow in the Department of Real Estate, Planning and Geoinformatics at Aalto University, Finland. Her main research interests focus on European urban development strategies as well as on the interplay of our physical environment and the everyday urban experience.

Nancy Worth is a Banting Fellow in the School of Geography and Earth Sciences at McMaster University, Canada. Her current research examines work and social life with millennial women. She has published on temporality, sociality, mobilities and young people's transition to adulthood in journals such as *Area*, *Urban Studies* and *Geoforum*. She recently co-edited *Intergenerational Space* for Routledge.

Acknowledgements

Nancy and Irene wish to thank all the contributors to the book for their dedication to the project. We also wish to thank the team at Policy Press, especially Emily Watt, Laura Vickers and Laura Greaves for their support and expertise.

Contents

Part III: Mobilities

ONE

Introduction

Nancy Worth and Irene Hardill

Lifecourse research is undertaken by researchers from across the social sciences, often working in a multidisciplinary context, using the lifecourse as an underpinning concept and/or a method of study. In this book we aim to represent the diversity of lifecourse methodologies employed in the social sciences, as well as having a concern for epistemology – how different knowledge claims are connected to our research practices. Moreover, the contributors in this edited book emphasise how different theoretical frameworks and positionality affect the research process – each contributor examines the challenges of their research design and how they worked through methodological issues – providing reflexive accounts of the *process* of lifecourse research, including a focus on ethical issues.

This collection has its origins in a series of conference sessions held at the American Association of Geographers' (AAG) Annual Meeting in 2012 in New York City. Besides a theme of lifecourse research, we were interested in hearing methodological reflections – why researchers approach particular questions in particular ways. Geography matters to all social scientists who employ the lifecourse as a concept and a method of enquiry, as spaces and places form the geographical context of a person's lifecourse. Inspired by the work of Law (2004, p 5), who argues that 'methods, their rules, and even more methods' practices, not only describe but also help to *produce* the reality that they understand', we turned our attention to methods in lifecourse research not as a primer on how to do research but as a way of thinking though the power of method to generate the results of our research. It seemed to us that these vital questions of practice are often left out of published empirical and theoretical work on the lifecourse, where discussions of the complexities of research design and its implementation are sacrificed in favour of polished accounts of final results. The AAG sessions provoked a lively discussion about how we do lifecourse research in different ways both within and across social science disciplines. We also shared stories of what methods worked in our research, which ones failed spectacularly and which ones needed

to be adapted carefully to fit our inquiries, thinking through multiple ways of understanding 'best practice' and being ethically responsible to our research participants. Returning to Law (2004) and his wider call for more 'mess' in social science research, this collection represents our efforts to draw attention to how methods capture social life.

Conceptualising the lifecourse: age, generation and transition

The lifecourse implies not simply chronological age but addresses individual and collective trajectories of experience in space, in place and through time as these are shaped by events, roles, memory and retrospection. As defined by the well-known sociologist and pioneer in the field, Glen Elder, the lifecourse is 'a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time' (Giele and Elder, 1998, p 22). A lifecourse approach affords researchers the possibility to examine an individual's life history using a variety of data gathering tools, and to understand how early events influence future decisions and events such as marriage and divorce or involvement in crime. Engaging qualitatively or quantitatively with time, space and mobilities enables a more finely grained understanding of everyday life, and the uncovering of how the personal is interlinked with the immediate and wider social context.

Sociologists began using the lifecourse as a framework for the study of human lives and social change in the 20th century. The lifecourse as a theoretical orientation came from the desire to understand social pathways, their developmental effects, and their relation to personal and social-historical conditions. From this innovative work the lifecourse as an organising concept and a research method began to be employed by academics across the social sciences.

The pioneering study *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–20) was undertaken by Thomas and Znaniecki, and made use of life histories and trajectories. Thomas argued for the employment of a longitudinal approach (cf Mortimer and Shanahan, 2004), a view that was echoed by C. Wright Mills (1959) in the post war period. Within psychology, ambitious longitudinal studies were undertaken before the Second World War. One indicative example is the Oakland Growth Study of children born in 1920–21 (Jones et al, 1971). Such studies collected a wealth of data and some extended to study their research participants into adulthood. The participants in these childhood studies experienced enormous social change, and the wealth of data collected resulted in the emergence of new ways of thinking about

human lives and development. The changing demographic profile of the population, the result of increasing longevity, declining fertility and mortality, led to social scientists seeking to understand the lives of older people. This field of research was pioneered by Bernice Neugarten in the 1950s (Neugarten, 1996), and such studies helped to demonstrate the enormous diversity of people's lives, and how social norms give meaning to, and even direct, individual trajectories.

A further push towards the more complex treatment of human lives through longitudinal research projects occurred in the 1960s, and involved both prospective and retrospective data collection. Such an approach allowed for the collection of detailed life histories (Giele and Elder, 1998). This innovation went hand-in-hand with developments in empirical procedures, statistical techniques and interpretative approaches, which are at the heart of quantitative lifecourse research (Giele and Elder, 1998). Although lifecourse developments in the US have been quantitative to a large extent, a distinctive emphasis in European studies has centred on using individual biographies and in-depth interviews (Heinz and Krüger, 2001). Social scientists have also placed emphasis on understanding the context in which individual lives are lived, including social pathways, such as the family cycle, which was conceived of as a set of ordered stages (Hill, 1970). A second such organising concept that has been used is of the 'career'. The career has been employed as a way of linking roles across the lifecourse for individuals and the households in which they are situated (Green et al, 1999).

In contemporary research on the lifecourse, three concepts predominate – age, generation and transitions, which in the following sections we examine in detail. Age is relational, employed to add context to lived experience, while generation is used as a way of temporally positioning people in relation to one another, while the concept of transitions is used to think through change across the lifecourse.

Age from a lifecourse approach

Before we go further we will distinguish age as biological/physiological ageing, chronological age and age as a social construction. Biological ageing is the progressive decline in physiological ability to meet demands that occur over time. Chronological age refers to the number of years a person has lived. Age as a social construction refers to the social understandings and significance that are attached to chronological age. This understanding of age can structure the lifecourse through age expectations, social timetables, and generalised age grades such

as childhood. Age represents not only a point in the life span and a historical marker but also a subjective understanding about the temporal nature of life. From a lifecourse approach, age is relational – adding context across an individual's experience and allowing comparison to a cohort (Hopkins and Pain, 2007). Both age and lifecourse can be understood as socially constructed – what it means to be 18 for example depends on one's culture, as do the various age boundaries that are seen as important. In general,

> the life course is organized around the *system of labour* that prevails in society. This applies to the shape of the lifecourse – its most obvious temporal ordering today has become the tripartition into periods of preparation, 'activity', and retirement – as well as to its organizing principle. (Kohli, 1986, p 272)

Work also structures many of our transitions through the lifecourse (Marshall et al, 2001). However, there is increasing attention on 'alternative' lifecourses that challenge age boundaries, including lifelong learning (Biesta and Tedder, 2007) and children working (Jennings et al, 2006). Studies of age from a lifecourse perspective are often rooted in place – including school, the workplace and retirement communities. This focus on age segregated institutions reflects the organisation of many societies in the global north, yet this is slowly changing to reflect less rigid adherence to the tripartite schema of education, work and leisure as, for some, lifestyles and life choices become less tied to age expectations.

A further illustration of the power of the lifecourse to unite social scientists and scientists was recently seen in the UK in the New Dynamics of Ageing Research Programme (NDA), which was established by five of the UK Research Councils to better understand the way in which older people's lives may be changing as a result of social, economic and technical developments.[1] Although the lives of people over 50 years was the focus of study (Hennessey and Walker, 2011; Walker, 2007), the lifecourse was employed as an underpinning concept and as a method of study (Hardill and Olphert, 2012; Schwanen et al, 2012). With the exception of research on lifecourse and migration, there has tended to be more interest in the lives of children and young people and of older people, than in those in adulthood and midlife (although see Katz et al, 2012).

Generation and intergenerationality

Generation is employed within the social sciences as a way of temporally positioning people in relation to one another within a family lineage and also has extra-familial uses that attempt to group people based on their time of birth, though the latter is also defined in terms of cohort (Alwin and McCammon, 2003; Szydlik, 2012). Drawing on the notion of generations developed by Karl Mannheim (1952 [1927]) in his essay, 'On The Problem of Generations', in which he recognised that generations are not internally homogeneous but consist of 'generational units' that can be differentiated based on factors including class, human geographers have examined the sociospatial consequences of the generational ordering of society. This extra-familial notion of generation is more or less analogous to the demographic notion of 'cohort', a concept that refers to a group of people born within a particular period of time.

Traditionally social scientists have compartmentalised the study of age into the study of younger and older generations (midlife has been studied less), but the concept of intergenerationality can also be employed to think relationally, addressing connections and interactions between generational groups (Vanderbeck and Worth, 2014). Viewing intergenerationality as an aspect of social identity suggests that individuals' and groups' sense of themselves and others is partly based on generational difference or sameness. Moreover, these identities are not seen as fixed but dynamic, with variability reflecting differently situated contexts including systems of kinship and cultural understandings of age and generation. Intergenerationality has largely been studied within the family, including intra-family geographies of parenting, parent–child relations, grandparent–grandchild relations, and extra-familial relations. Through this approach how people's lives are linked and interdependent has been studied, including geographies of childhood, old age and gendering.

Transitions and trajectories

Finally, a recent development in lifecourse research involves paying attention to transitions, particularly to young people (such as transitions from youth to adulthood or transitions they make between institutions such as school and university), but there is also work on transitions in familial relations in later life, including grandparenthood and retirement. Transitions are periods of change; they are dynamic rather than determined, marking positional change within life trajectories,