

## CHAPTER

# 1

## *A Life Course Perspective*

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### CHAPTER OUTLINE

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### OPENING QUESTIONS

- Why do social workers need to understand how people change from conception 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 early life experiences and later experiences in adulthood.

### Case Study 1.1

#### David Sanchez's Search for Connections

David Sanchez has a Hispanic name, but he explains to his social worker, as he is readied 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 seven years, he is not surprised when his body reminds him how he abused it.

The social worker suggests 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—because he is a Vietnam veteran—for health services at the local Veterans Administration (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 Native American/First Nations 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 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 sweat lodge, 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 Native American friends.

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It was through the Native American 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 Nations speakers talked about the trans-generational 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 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.

A social worker working a situation like this—helping Mr. Sanchez with his discharge plans—must be aware that discharge planning involves one life transition that is a part of a larger life trajectory.

—*Maria E. Zuniga*

## Case Study 1.2

### Mahdi Mahdi's Shared Journey

Social workers involved in refugee resettlement work are eager to learn all they can about the refugee experience. Social workers in these scenarios are learning from their clients, but they will also find it helpful to talk with other resettlement workers who have made a successful adjustment after entering the United States as refugees. In this particular case, the social worker has been particularly grateful for what she has 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 in 1992.

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 high school art when he graduated from college, but he was immediately drafted as an officer in the military to fight in the Iran-Iraq War. He was supposed to serve for only two years, but the war went on for eight 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 emigrate in November 1990.

But on August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and war broke out once again. 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 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 two 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 several 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 worrying 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.

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Mahdi and his family live in a neighborhood of Anglo Americans. His daughters' friends are mostly Anglo Americans and Hispanic Americans. Although Mahdi and his family are 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 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 the social worker 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 three 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.

A social worker who will assist many refugee families has a lot to gain from learning stories like this—about Mahdi Mahdi's preimmigration experience, migration journey, and resettlement adjustments. We must realize, however, that each immigration journey is unique.

—*Story told June 2002*

**Case Study 1.3****The Suarez Family After September 11, 2001**

Maria is a busy, active 11-year-old whose life was changed by the events of September 11, 2001. Her mother, Emma Suarez, worked at the World Trade Center and did not survive the attack.

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 during 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 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.

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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, because Juan was worried about Rosa, he brought her to the Red Cross Disaster Counseling Center where they met with a social worker who was specially trained for working in disaster situations. Rosa 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 were blessed with the generosity of their Catholic parish, employers, neighbors, and a large extended family; however, financial worries are not their greatest concerns at the moment. They are relieved that Maria will have access to money for a college education, because children of parents who died in the World Trade Center catastrophe are eligible to receive death benefits until age 21, or 23 if they are full-time students. They continue to miss Emma terribly and struggle to understand the horrific thing that happened to her, but the pain is not as great as it once was. They all still have nightmares about planes hitting tall buildings, however.

Maria is lucky to have such a close loving family. She is sorry that she doesn't have clear memories of her mother and likes to look at photos of the beautiful young woman that she understands to be her mother. She feels sad when she hears people talk about the events of September 11, 2001, which happens in the South Bronx a lot.

A social worker doing disaster relief must be aware of the large impact that disasters have on the multi-generational family, both in the present and for years to come.

## A DEFINITION OF THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

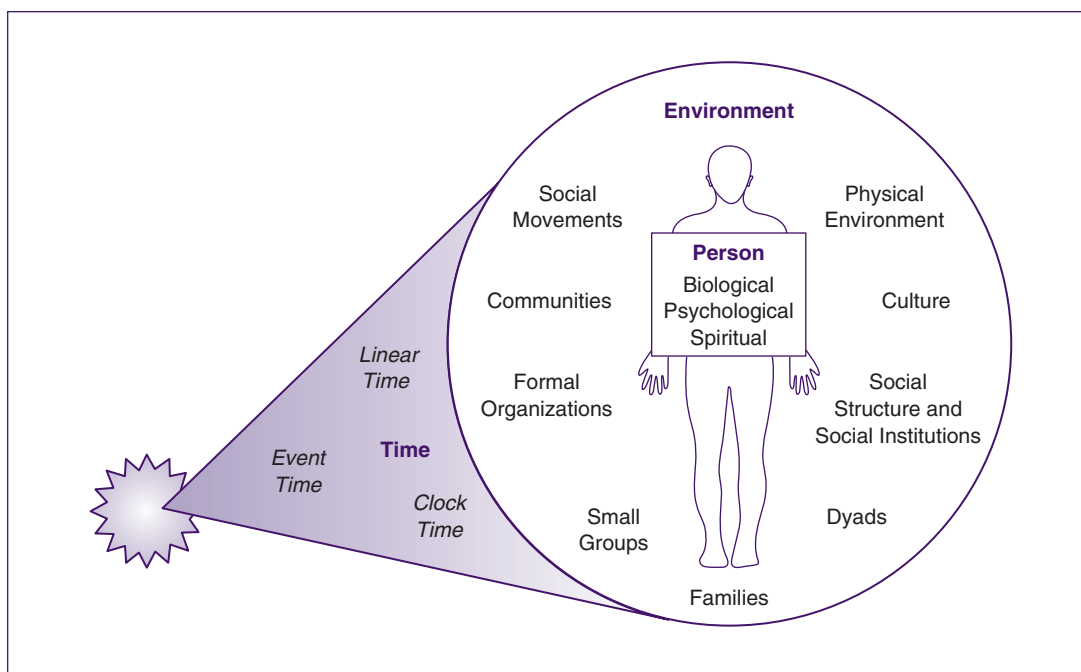
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One of the things that the stories of David Sanchez, Mahdi Mahdi, and the Suarez family have in common is that they unfolded over time, across multiple generations. We all have stories that unfold as we progress through life. A useful way to understand this relationship between time and human behavior is the **life course perspective**, which looks at how chronological age, relationships, 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.

The purpose of this book and its companion volume *Dimensions of Human Behavior: Person and Environment* is to provide ways for you to think about the nature and complexities of the people and situations that are at the center of social work practice. To begin to do that, we must first clarify the purpose of social work and the approach it takes to individual and collective human behavior. This is laid out in the 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards of the Council on Social Work Education:

The purpose of the social work profession is to promote human and community well-being. Guided by a person and environment construct, a global perspective, respect for human diversity, and knowledge based on scientific inquiry, social work's purpose is actualized through its quest for social and economic justice, the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty, and the enhancement of the quality of life for all persons. (Council on Social Work Education, 2008, p. 1)

Section 2.1.7 of the policy lays out the guidelines for the human behavior and the social environment curriculum, which includes knowledge about human behavior across the life course. That is the specific purpose of this book.



▲ **Exhibit 1.1** The Relationship of Person, Environment, and Time

Social workers also have a well-defined value base to guide their efforts to promote individual and community well-being. Six core values of the profession have been set out in a preamble to the Code of Ethics established by the National Association for Social Workers (NASW) in 1996 and revised in 1999 (NASW, 1999). These values are service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. Throughout the chapters, the contributing authors and I provide suggestions about needed social work services and how to provide those services in a trustworthy manner. We take social work's commitment to social justice seriously, and social justice issues are highlighted in every chapter. The life course perspective that forms the basis of this book puts equal value on individual agency and human connectedness; therefore, it serves as a good framework for social work's commitments to both the dignity and worth of the person as well as the importance of human relationships. The contributing authors and I draw on the best available evidence about the life course to assist the reader to develop and enhance expertise in serving people of all life stages.

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 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 young Maria Suarez, the events of September 11, 2001, will become a permanent part of her life story.



▲ **Photo 1.1** The life course perspective emphasizes ways in which humans are interdependent and gives special emphasis to the family as the primary arena for experiencing the world.

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 Native American 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. Maria Suarez's life course was changed forever by culture-related geopolitical conflict.

## THEORETICAL ROOTS OF THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

The life course perspective (LCP) is a theoretical model that has been emerging over the last 45 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 to write about a life course perspective, and he 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 wealthy and powerful persons. 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 psychology looks for universal, predictable events and pathways, but the life course perspective calls attention to how historical time, social location, and culture affect the individual experience of each life stage.

The life course perspective is still relatively young, but its popularity is growing. In recent years, it has begun to be used to understand the pathways of families (Huinink & Feldhaus, 2009; MacMillan & Copher, 2005), organizations (King, 2009), and social movements (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). I suggest that it has potential for understanding patterns of stability and change in all types of social systems. Gerontologists increasingly use the perspective to understand how old age is shaped by events experienced earlier in life (Browne, Mokuau, & Braun, 2009; Ferraro & Shippee, 2009). The life course perspective has become a major theoretical framework in criminology (Chen, 2009; Haynie, Petts, Maimon, & Piquero, 2009) and the leading perspective driving longitudinal study of health behaviors and outcomes (Evans, Crogan, Belyea, & Coon, 2009; Osler, 2006). It has also been proposed as a useful perspective for understanding patterns of lifetime drug use (Hser, Longshore, & Anglin, 2007).

## BASIC CONCEPTS OF THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

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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 during the same time period and who experience particular social changes within a given culture in the same sequence and at the same age (Alwin & McCammon, 2003; Bjorklund & Bee, 2008; D. Newman, 2008; Settersten, 2003a). *Generation* is another term used to convey a similar meaning. Generation is usually used to refer to a period of about 20 years, but a cohort may be shorter than that, and life course scholars often make a distinction between the two terms, suggesting that a birth cohort becomes a generation only when it develops some shared sense of its social history and a shared identity (see Alwin, McCammon, & Hofer, 2006).

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 (1946 to 1964) in the United States 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, sometimes called Generation Y or the Millennium Generation (born 1980 to late 1990s), began competing for slots in prestigious universities at the beginning of the 21st century (Argetsinger, 2001).

**Cohort:** Group of persons who were born during the same time period 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

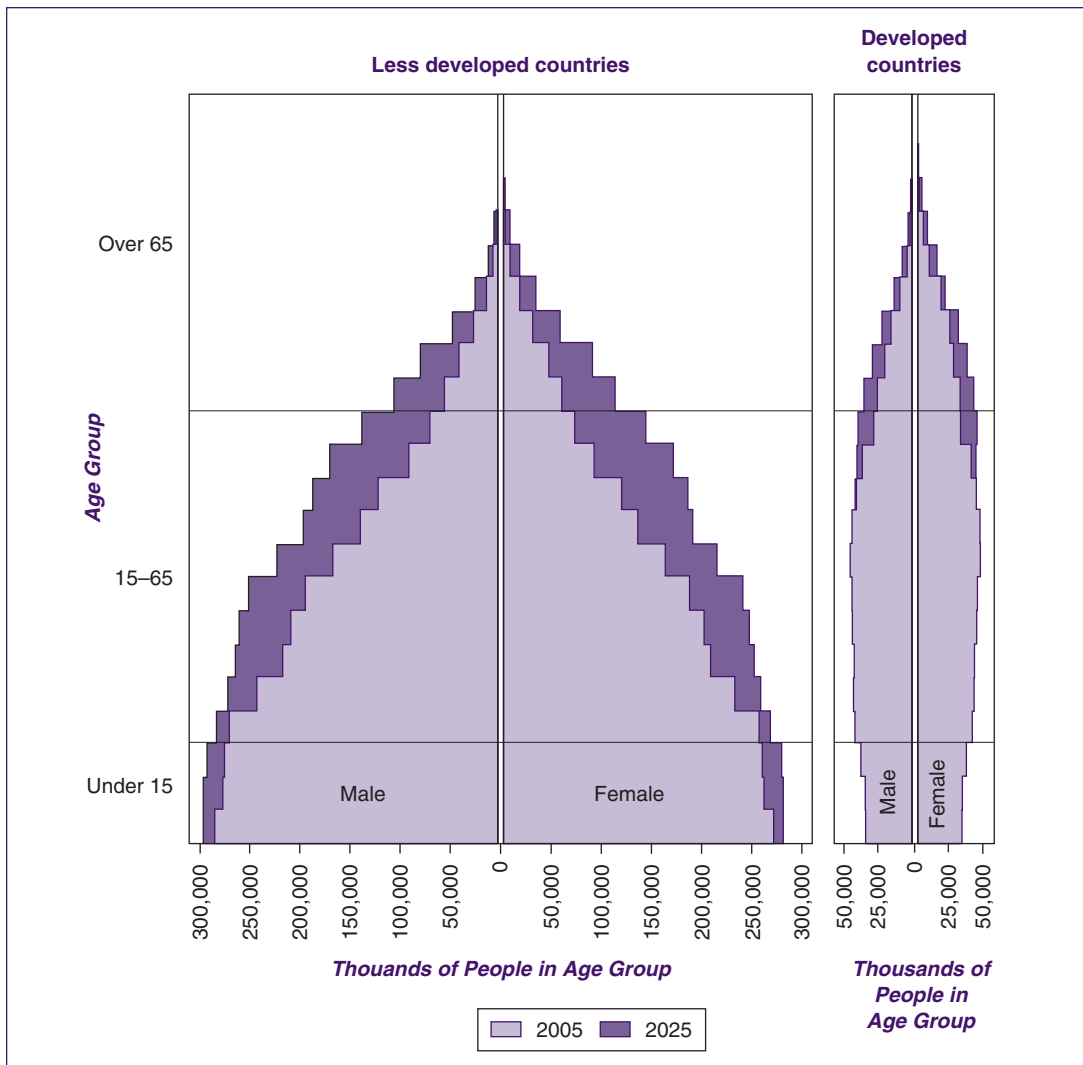
**Turning Point:** Life event or transition that produces a lasting shift in the life course trajectory

### ▲ Exhibit 1.2 Basic Concepts of the Life Course Perspective

Some observers suggest that cohorts develop strategies for the special circumstances they face (K. Newman, 2008). 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. However, one study found that large cohorts in affluent countries have higher rates of suicide than smaller cohorts, suggesting that not all members of large cohorts can find positive strategies for coping with competition for limited resources (Stockard & O’Brien, 2002).

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 regions of the world have significantly different population pyramids. In nonindustrial and recently industrializing countries (in Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East), fertility rates are high and life expectancies are low, leading to a situation in which the majority of people are young. In these countries, young people tend to overwhelm labor markets and education systems, and national standards of living decline. Some of these countries, such as the Philippines, have developed policies that encourage out-migration while other countries, such as China, have developed policies to limit fertility. In affluent, late industrial countries (Europe, North America, Japan), fertility rates are low and life expectancy is high, resulting in large numbers of older adults and a declining youthful population. These countries are becoming increasingly dependent on immigration (typically more attractive to young adults) for a workforce and taxpayers to support the aging population. In the United States, migration of legal and illegal immigrants accounted for more than one fourth of the population growth in the 1980s and for about one third of the growth in the 1990s (McFalls, 1998). High rates of immigration and high fertility rates among immigrant families are continuing in the early part of the 21st century, and it is predicted that 82% of the projected U.S. population increase between 2005 and 2050 will be the result of immigration (Passel & Cohn, 2008). Despite the economic necessity of immigrants in societies with aging populations, in the United States, as in many other affluent countries, there are strong anti-immigrant sentiments and angry calls to close the borders.

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. Although there are many challenges to getting reliable sex ratio data, it is estimated that there are 105 males born for every 100 females in the world (Davis et al., 2007). In most parts of the world, 104 to 108 males are born for every 100 female births, but the sex ratio at birth has been declining in most industrial countries in recent years. The reasons are not clear, but exposure to environmental toxins is suspected, with male fetuses being more susceptible to such exposures than female fetuses (Davis et al.). However, in countries where there is a strong preference for male children, such



▲ **Exhibit 1.3** Population Pyramids in Less Developed and Developed Countries

SOURCE: D. Newman, 2008. Reprinted with permission.

as China, India, Taiwan, and South Korea, female abortion and female infanticide have led to sex ratios of 110 or more at birth (Clarke & Craven, 2005). As you can see in Exhibit 1.3, sex ratios decline across adulthood because males die at higher rates at every age. Again, there are exceptions to this trend in impoverished countries with strong male preference, where female children may be abandoned, neglected, given less food, or given up for foreign adoption (D. Newman, 2008). Sex ratios can be further unbalanced by war (which leads to greater male mortality) or high rates of either male or female out-migration or in-migration.

For some time, sex ratios at birth have been lower for African Americans than for Whites in the United States, meaning that fewer African American boy babies are born per 100 girl babies than is the case in the White population.

However, recent research shows some narrowing in this disparity, with the sex ratio at birth declining among Whites and increasing slightly for African Americans. The racial disparity widens across the life course, however, with a 2005 estimated sex ratio of 86.5 men to 100 women among African American adults over age 18 compared with 96.4 men to 100 women among White adults (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2008a).

### *Transitions*

A life course perspective is stagelike 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 (Elder & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2003; Hagestad, 2003; Hser et al., 2007). 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, 2005a; Hagestad, 2003). 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. Nursing scholars have recently used the life course perspective, the concept of transitions in particular, to understand role changes that occur in family caregiving of older adults (Evans et al., 2009).

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



▲ **Photo 1.2** The life course is full of transitions in roles and statuses; graduation from college or university is an important life transition that opens opportunities for future statuses and roles.

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

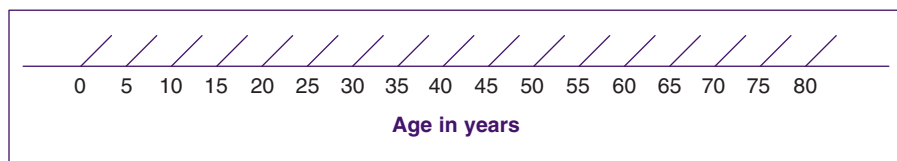
The changes involved in transitions are discrete and bounded; when they happen, an old phase of life ends and a new phase begins. In contrast, **trajectories** involve a longer view of long-term patterns of stability and change in a person's life, involving multiple transitions (Elder & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2003; George, 2003; Heinz, 2003). For example, getting married is a transition, but it is a transition that leads to a longer marital pathway that will have some stability but will probably involve other transitions along the way. Transitions are always embedded in trajectories. 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. Indeed, Hser et al. (2007) recommend the life course perspective for understanding drug use trajectories (or careers) that may include onset of use, acceleration of use, regular use, cessation of use, and relapse. Treatment may or may not be included in this trajectory.

Because individuals and families live their lives in multiple spheres, their lives are made up of multiple, intersecting trajectories—such as educational trajectories, family life trajectories, health trajectories, and work trajectories (George, 2003; Heinz, 2003). 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, 2003a). The term refers to the happening itself and not to the transitions that will occur because of the happening. For example, participating in one's own wedding is a common life event in all societies. The wedding is the life event, but it precipitates a transition that involves changes in roles and statuses in relation to the family of origin as well as the marriage family.

One common method for evaluating the effect of life events is Thomas Holmes and 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.



▲ **Exhibit 1.4** My Lifeline (Interlocking Trajectories)

Assuming that you live until at least 80 years of age, chart how you think your life course trajectory will look. Write major events and transitions 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 transitional in another.

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
Taking out a mortgage or loan for a lesser purchase (e.g., for a car, TV, freezer)	26
Major change in sleeping habits (a lot more or a lot less sleep, or change in part of day when asleep)	25

Life Event	Stress Rating
Major change in number of family get-togethers (e.g., a lot more or a lot less than usual)	24
Major change in eating habits (a lot less food intake or very different meal hours or surroundings)	23
Vacation	20
Christmas	20
Minor violations of the law (e.g., traffic tickets, jaywalking, disturbing the peace)	20
Beginning or ceasing formal schooling	19
Major change in living conditions (e.g., building a new home, remodeling, deterioration of home or neighborhood)	19
Revision of personal habits (e.g., dress, manners, associations)	18
Trouble with the boss	17
Major change in working hours or conditions	16
Change in residence	15
Major change in usual type and/or amount of recreation	13
Major change in church activities (e.g., a lot more or a lot less than usual)	12
Major change in social activities (e.g., clubs, dancing, movies, visiting)	11
Change to a new school	5

▲ **Exhibit 1.5** Life Change Events From the Holmes and Rahe Schedule of Recent Events

SOURCE: Holmes, 1978, p. 747. Reprinted with permission.

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)

Most existing inventories are biased toward undesirable, rather than desirable, events. Not all life events prompt harmful life changes. Indeed, researchers have begun to distinguish between positive and negative life events and to measure their different impacts on human behavior. For example, one research team explored the impact of recalled positive and negative life events on the psychological well-being of adolescents and found that the impact of recalled life events varies by personality type (Garcia & Siddiqui, 2009). Another research team investigated how

positive and negative life events trigger weight loss and weight gain, finding that weight loss is more associated with positive life events and weight gain with negative life events (Ogden, Stavriniaki, & Stubbs, 2009). And, another research team examined the impact of positive and negative life events on oral health, finding that negative life events are associated with poor oral health but no association exists between oral health and positive life events (Brennan & Spencer, 2009). This later research project reflects the way that the life course perspective is influencing research on predictors of health, including greater focus on the effects of life events.

However, the preponderance of research on the impact of life events on human behavior focuses on the negative impact of negative life events. Some researchers are trying to understand the mechanisms that link stressful life events with immune system pathology (Herberth et al., 2008). Other often researched topics include the role of negative life events in depressive symptoms (Miklowitz & Johnson, 2009) and the impact of traumatic life events on mental health (Mongillo, Briggs-Gowan, Ford, & Carter, 2009).

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 (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). In an effort to capture the meanings that people make of life events, recent researchers have used the approach of asking respondents to recall life events rather than using existing life events' inventories (Garcia & Siddiqui, 2009).

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). In one small exploratory study that used a life-line 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). Researchers have also developed a Children's Life Events Inventory, which has been used to study minority children and youth (Monaghan, Robinson, & Dodge, 1979) and an inventory to capture military events in the Chinese army (Hong-zheng, Zue-rong, & Mei-ying, 2004).

### *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 time when major change occurs in the life course trajectory. It may involve a transformation in how the person views the self in relation to the world and/or a transformation in how the person responds to risk and opportunity (Cappeliez, Beaupré, & Robitaille, 2008; Ferraro & Shippee, 2009). It serves as a lasting change and not just a temporary detour. As significant as they are to individuals' lives, turning points usually become obvious only as time passes (Rönkä, Oravala, & Pulkkinen, 2003). Yet in one Finnish study, 99% of respondents in their mid-30s reported that there had been at least one turning point in their lives; the average number of reported turning points was three (Rönkä et al.).

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. 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 (Hser et al., 2007).

Transitions and life events do not always produce the major change that would constitute a turning point. However, either a transition or life event may be perceived as a turning point as time passes. Longitudinal research indicates that 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 (Jasso, 2003). 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. The same type of life event may be a turning point for one individual, family, or other collectivity, but not for another. For example, one research team found that an HIV diagnosis was a turning point for 37% of their sample of HIV-positive people but was not reported as a turning point for 63% of the sample (Kremer, Ironson, & Kaplan, 2009). Less dramatic transitions may also become turning points, depending on the individual's assessment of their importance. An Australian study of women found a change in the nature of turning points in midlife—before midlife, turning points were likely to be related to role transitions; but after midlife, they were more likely to be related to personal growth (Leonard, 2006). 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

One research team interviewed older adults between the ages of 60 and 87 about perceived turning points in their lives and found that the most frequently reported turning points involved health and family. The perceived turning points occurred across the entire life course, but there was some clustering at midlife (ages 45–64), a period in which 32.2% of the reported turning points occurred (Cappeliez et al., 2008). Gender differences have been found in reported turning points in samples of young adults as well as samples of older adults, with women reporting more turning points in the family domain and men reporting more turning points in the work domain (Cappeliez et al.; Rönkä et al., 2003). It is not clear whether this gender difference will be manifested in future cohorts if women's work trajectories continue to become more similar to men's. Researchers have begun to study the turning points that lead women to leave abusive relationships (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007) and the turning points in the caregiving careers of Mexican American women who care for older family members (Evans et al., 2009). This later research identifies a “point of reckoning” turning point when the caregiver recognizes the need for extensive caregiving and reorganizes her life to accept responsibility for providing care.

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 send life trajectories off track and others that bring life trajectories back on track. 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 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.

### Critical Thinking Questions 1.1

Consider the life course story of either David Sanchez or Mahdi Mahdi. Based on the information you have, what do you think would be the chapter titles if Mr. Sanchez or Mr. Mahdi wrote a book about his life? How about a book about your own life to date: what would be the chapter titles of that book? Which show up more in the chapter titles, life transitions (changes in roles in statuses) or life events (significant happenings)?

## MAJOR THEMES OF THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

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Over a decade ago, Glen Elder Jr. (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 more 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** when distinctive formative experiences are shared at the same point in the life course and have a lasting impact on a birth cohort (Alwin & McCammon, 2003). The same historical events may affect different cohorts in different ways. 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 (Vikat, Speder, Beets, Billari, & Buhler, 2007). Recently, researchers have examined the impact of globalization, declining labor market opportunities, and rising housing costs on young adult transitions (see K. Newman, 2008; Scherger, 2009). These researchers are finding that transitions associated with young adulthood (leaving the parental home, marriage, first parenthood) are occurring later for the current cohort of young adults than for their parents in many countries, particularly in countries with weak welfare states. No doubt, researchers will be studying the impact of the global economic recession that began in late 2007 on life course trajectories of different cohorts. Other aspects of the current historical era that will most likely generate life

**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 as a result of cohort variations, social class, culture, gender, and individual agency.

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

### ▲ Exhibit 1.6 Major Themes of the Life Course Perspective

course research are the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the election of the first African American president in the United States.

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. One such lag today in the United States 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, 2003b). In the United States, our speech abounds with expressions related to age: “terrible 2s,” “sweet 16,” “20-something,” “life begins at 40,” “senior discounts,” and lately “60 is the new 40.”

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 (Settersten, 2003b). For example, child labor and childbearing in adolescence are considered off-time in late industrial and postindustrial countries, but in much of the world such timing of roles is seen as a part of the natural order (Dannefer, 2003a, 2003b). Likewise, death in early or middle adulthood is considered off-time in late industrial and postindustrial societies, but, because of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, has now become commonplace in much of Africa. 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 (Solomon, Helvitz, & Zerach, 2009). 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. One method is to compare an individual's physical condition with the conditions of others; for example, bone density scans are compared with the scans of a healthy 20-year-old.

**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 (Bjorklund & Bee, 2008). 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; recent research has referred to this perceptual aspect of age as "subjective age" or "age identity" (Bowling, See-Tai, Ebrahim, Gabriel, & Solanki, 2005; Hubley & Russell, 2009; Solomon et al., 2009). The preponderance of research on subjective age has focused on older adults and found that older adults around the globe tend to report a subjective age that is 10–20 years younger than their chronological age (Hubley & Russell, 2009; Montepare, 2009). This research has also found that subjective age is a better predictor of mortality than chronological age (Uotinen, Rantanen, & Suutama, 2005). In addition, recent research has found subjective age to be a meaningful concept in adolescence, with younger adolescents feeling older than their chronological age and older adolescents feeling younger than their chronological age as they face the transition into adulthood (Galambos, Albrecht, & Jansson, 2009).

**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 leave the parental home. Conversely, many countries 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 (K. Newman, 2008; Scherger, 2009; Settersten, 2003b). They have paid particular attention to changes in age norms for the transitions of young adulthood (K. Newman, 2008; Scherger, 2009).

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 middle 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. Such fine gradations do not exist in most non-industrial and newly industrializing countries (Dannefer, 2003a, 2003b).

**Spiritual age** indicates the current position of a person in the ongoing search for meaning, purpose, and moral relationships. 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: contemplation, 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 (2000, 2001) Integral Theory of Consciousness also proposes an association between age and spiritual development, but Wilber 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 (Brückner & Mayer, 2005; Scherger, 2009; Settersten, 2003b). Simone Scherger (2009) examined the timing of young adult transitions (moving out of parental home, marriage, becoming a parent) among 12 cohorts in West Germany. Cohorts of a five-year range (e.g., born 1920–1924) were used for the analysis, beginning with the cohort born in 1920–1924 and ending with the cohort born in 1975–1979. This research indicated a trend toward destandardization. There was greater variability in the timing of transitions (moving out of the parental home, marriage, and becoming a parent) among the younger cohorts than among the older cohorts. Scherger also found the transitions were influenced by gender (men made the transitions later than women) and education level (higher education was associated with delay in the transitions). It is important to note, however, that another research team found that young adult transitions have remained stable in the Nordic countries where strong welfare institutions provide generous supports for the young adult transitions (K. Newman, 2008). 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 inform social policy.

Many 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, in the United States there are 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 (K. Newman, 2008; Settersten, 2003b). It is often noted that formal age structuring becomes more prevalent as nations modernize. European life course scholars suggest that U.S.-based life course scholars have underplayed the role of government in age structuring, suggesting that, in Europe, strong centralized governments play a larger role than in the United States in structuring the life course (Leisering, 2003; Marshall & Mueller, 2003). Indeed, there is evidence that life course pathways in Germany and Switzerland are more standardized than in the United States and Britain (Perrig-Chiello & Perren, 2005). There is also evidence that events and transitions in childhood and adolescence are much more age-normed and structured than in adulthood (Perrig-Chiello & Perren).

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. 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, long-term care, and so forth.

In spite of formal age structuring, as suggested earlier, 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 (K. Newman, 2008). Trajectories in the family domain may be more flexible than work and educational trajectories (Settersten, 2003b). However, the landscape of work is changing, with less opportunity for continuous and stable employment, and this is creating greater diversity in work trajectories (Heinz, 2003). Research in the future will, no doubt, capture the diverse work trajectories that were influenced by the economic recession that began in late 2007. In addition, although educational trajectories remain standardized for the most well-off, who move smoothly from secondary to higher education, they are less structured for other members of society (Pallas, 2003). Life course trajectories also vary in significant ways by gender, race, ethnicity, and social class (Scherger, 2009). This issue will be discussed further later in the chapter.

### *Linked or Interdependent Lives*

The life course perspective emphasizes the interdependence of human lives and the ways in which people are reciprocally connected on several levels. It calls attention to how relationships both support and control an individual's behavior. **Social support**, which is defined as help rendered by others that benefits an individual or collectivity, is an obvious element of interdependent lives. Relationships also control behavior through expectations, rewards, and punishments.

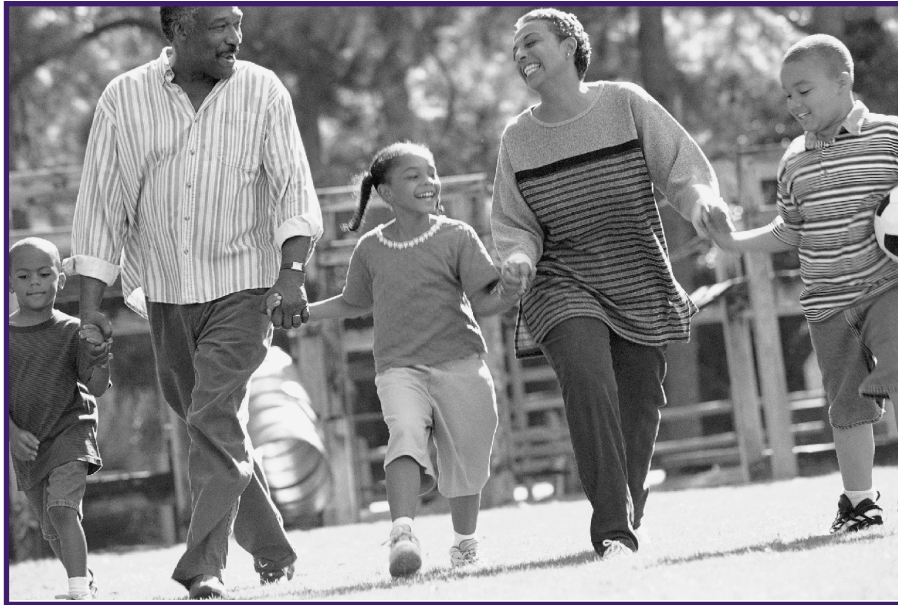
In the United States, particular attention has been paid to the family as a source of support and control. In addition, the lives of family members are linked across generations, with both opportunity and misfortune having an intergenerational impact. The cases of David Sanchez, Mahdi Mahdi, and Maria 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 and well-being is now well established (e.g., Barajas, Philipson, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Conger & Conger, 2008; Elder, 1974; Werner & Smith, 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.

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. Parents may be negatively affected by stressful situations that their children face. For instance, Mahdi Mahdi says that his father died from worrying about his sons. One research team found a relationship between the problems of adult children and the emotional and relational well-being of their parents. Research participants who reported having adult children with a greater accumulation of personal and social problems (e.g., chronic disease, mental health problems, substance abuse problems, work-related problems, relationship problems) also reported poorer levels of well-being than reported by participants whose children were reported to have fewer problems (Greenfield & Marks, 2006). Without longitudinal research, it is impossible to know which came first, reduced parental well-being or adult child problems, but this research does lend strong support for the idea that lives are linked across generations.

The pattern of mutual support between older adults and their adult children is formed by life events and transitions across the life course. It is also fundamentally changed when families go through historical disruptions such as



▲ **Photo 1.3** Parents' and children's lives are linked—when parents experience stress or joy, so do children, and when children experience stress and joy, so do parents.

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 (Clark, Glick, & Bures, 2009).

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. Similarly, the timing of adult children's educational, family, and work transitions often conflicts with the needs of aging parents (Huinink & Feldhaus, 2009). 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, 2005a).

### Links With the Wider World

Although the life course perspective has its origins in Elder's (1974) research on the ways that families and individuals are linked to situations in the economic institution, it seems that we know a lot more at this point about the ways that individuals and their multigenerational families are interdependent than about the interdependence between individuals and families and other groups and collectivities. However, in recent years life course researchers have been documenting the ways that individual and family life course trajectories are linked to situations in the labor market, the housing market, the education system, and the welfare system (K. Newman, 2008; Scherger, 2009). This line of research is well illustrated by one research project that examined young adult transitions in Western Europe and Japan (K. Newman). Katherine Newman (2008) reports that there are two divergent trends in the timing of young adult transitions in postindustrial societies. On the one hand, young adults are staying in the parental home for a prolonged

period in Japan and the Southern European countries. For example, in Japan, the age of marriage has been rising, and more than 60% of unmarried men and 70% of unmarried women age 30–34 live with their parents. On the other hand, youth typically leave home at the age of 18 in the Nordic countries of Northern Europe (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden). This raises a question about the structural arrangements in these countries that are producing such divergent trends in life course trajectories.

First, changes in the labor market are driving the delayed departure of young adults from the parental home in Southern Europe and Japan (K. Newman, 2008). In the 1980s, when globalization began to produce higher unemployment, governments in Southern Europe and Japan began to loosen their commitment to lifetime employment. As a result, companies began to hire part-time and temporary workers; such tenuous connection to the labor market is associated with continued co-residence of young adults with their parents. Unemployment has always been higher in Southern Europe than in Northern Europe, but the divergence in young adult transitions in these two European regions is not fully explained by conditions in the labor market.

Second, timing of departure from the parental home is linked to situations in the housing market. In the United States, there are a number of housing options for marginally employed young adults, including pooling resources with a roommate or romantic partner or finding rental housing in a less desirable neighborhood. Such options are dependent on a strong rental housing market, however. In Southern European countries, great emphasis is put on owner-occupied housing and relatively little rental housing is available. For example, more than 85% of the population in Spain lives in homes they own. In addition, European banks typically are willing to lend only 50% of the cost of a house. In contrast, in the Nordic countries, there is a large rental sector in the housing market, with only 60% to 65% of the population living in homes that they own. Katherine Newman (2008) builds the case that these conditions in the housing market influence the timing of departure from the parental home.

Third, it is often suggested that there is a linkage between the education system and timing of departure from the parental home. More specifically, it is argued that young adults who participate in higher education leave the parental home later than those who do not participate in higher education, and that the trend toward greater participation in higher education is an important factor in the trend toward later departure from the parental home (see Scherger, 2009). This is not the whole story, however, because the Nordic countries have a higher proportion of emerging adults in higher education than countries in Southern Europe, and yet young adults in the Nordic countries depart the parental home earlier than those in Southern Europe (K. Newman, 2008).

And, finally, there is strong evidence of a linkage between the welfare system and the timing of departure from the parental home (K. Newman, 2008). More specifically, the early departure from the parental home in Nordic countries is subsidized by a generous welfare system that provides generous housing and educational benefits. The Nordic governments provide much of what families are expected to provide in the weaker welfare systems in Southern Europe and Japan.

Katherine Newman (2008) argues convincingly that it is a confluence of situations in different societal systems that impact individual and family life trajectories. In terms of linked lives, she found some evidence that young adults feel more closely linked to their families in Japan and Southern Europe than in Nordic countries—a situation that carried both positive and negative consequences. Nordic young adults, conversely, feel more closely linked to the government and the welfare institution than young adults in Japan and Southern Europe.

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 oppressive environments in which they live. Examples include the extensive and intensive natural support systems of Hispanic families like the Suarez family (Falicov, 2005) and the special role of the church for African Americans (Billingsley, 1999). Others construct lives of desperation or resistance in response to limited opportunities.

Dale Dannefer (2003a, 2003b) reminds us that, in the global economy, lives are linked around the world. The lifestyles of people in affluent countries depend on cheap labor and cheap raw products in Africa, South America, the Caribbean, parts of Asia, and other places. Children and women in impoverished countries labor long hours to make an increasing share of low-cost products consumed in affluent countries. Women migrate from impoverished countries to become the domestic laborers in affluent countries, allowing women in affluent countries to leave the home to take advantage of career opportunities, and allowing the domestic workers to send the money they make back home to support their own families (McMichael, 2008; Parrenas, 2001).

### *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. 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. Steven Hitlin and Glen Elder Jr. (2007) note that the concept of human agency is used by different theorists in different ways, but when used by life course theorists it refers to "attempts to exert influence to shape one's life trajectory" (p. 182). It involves acting with an orientation toward the future, with an eye for "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, cited in Hitlin & Elder, 2007, p. 183).

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 (Saleeby, 2008).

Emphasis on human agency in the life course perspective has been greatly aided by the work of psychologist Albert Bandura. Bandura proposes that humans are agentic, meaning they are capable of intentionally influencing their own functioning and life circumstances (Bandura, 2002, 2006). In his early work, he introduced the two concepts of *self-efficacy*, or sense of personal competence, and *efficacy expectation*, or expectation that one can personally accomplish a goal. More recently (Bandura, 2006), he has presented a psychological theory of human agency. This theory proposes that there are three modes of human agency:

1. *Personal agency* is exercised individually, using personal influence to shape environmental events or one's own behavior.
2. *Proxy agency* is exercised to influence others who have greater resources to act on one's behalf to meet needs and accomplish goals.
3. *Collective agency* is exercised on the group level when people act together to meet needs and accomplish goals.

Bandura argues that everyday life requires use of all three modes of agency. There are many circumstances, such as those discussed above, where individuals can exercise personal agency to shape situations. However, there are

many situations over which individuals do not have direct control, and they must seek out others who have greater influence to act on their behalf. Other circumstances exist in which goals are only achievable or more easily and comprehensively achievable by working collectively with others.

Cultural psychology critics of the concept of human agency have argued that it is a culture-bound concept that does not apply as well in collectivist societies as in individualistic societies (see Markus & Kitayama, 2003). They argue that individualistic societies operate on a model of *disjoint agency*, where agency resides in the independent self. In contrast, collectivist societies operate on a model of *conjoint agency*, where agency resides in relationships between interdependent selves. Markus and Kitayama (2003) provide empirical support for their proposal that agency is experienced differently by members of individualistic and collectivist societies. They cite several studies that provide evidence that European American children perform better and are more confident if they are allowed to make choices (of tasks, objects, and so on), but Asian American children perform no better if allowed to make such choices. They also note that in U.S. coverage of the Olympics, athletes are typically asked about how they personally feel about their efforts and their success. In contrast, in Japanese coverage, athletes are typically asked “Who helped you achieve?” Markus and Kitayama do not deny that individuals from collectivist cultures sometimes think in terms of personal agency and individuals from individualistic cultures sometimes think in terms of collective agency. They argue, however, that there is a difference in the emphasis placed on these approaches to agency in different cultures.

Bandura (2002, 2006) agrees with this later statement. He argues that although people in all cultures must use all three modes of agency (personal, proxy, and collective), there are cultural variations in the relative emphasis put on the different modes. He also argues that there are individual variations of preferences within cultures and that globalization is producing some cultural sharing.

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. Hitlin and Elder (2007) suggest that there are both biological and social structural limits to agency. They note research that indicates that greater perceptions of personal control contribute to better health among older adults, but also propose that agency declines across the life course because of declining physical functioning.

The concepts of proxy agency and collective agency bring us back to linked and interdependent lives. These concepts add important dimensions to the discussion of human agency and can serve to counterbalance the extreme individualism of U.S. society. The modes of agency also raise important issues for social workers. When do we encourage clients to use personal individual agency, when do we use our own influence as proxy agents for clients, and when is collective agency called for?

### *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. However, the life course research to date has been based on samples from affluent societies and fails to account for global diversity, particularly for the life course trajectories of the great majority of the world’s people who live in non-industrial or early industrializing countries (Dannefer, 2003a, 2003b). Consequently, the life course perspective has the potential to accommodate global diversity but has not adequately done so to date.

We also want to interject a word here about terminology and human diversity. As we attempted to uncover what is known about human diversity in life course trajectories, we struggled with terminology to define identity groups. We searched for consistent language to describe different groups, and we were dedicated to using language that identity groups would use to describe themselves. However, we ran into challenges endemic to our time related to the language

of diversity. First, it is not the case that all members of a given identity group at any given time embrace the same terminology for their group. Second, as we reviewed literature from different historical moments, we recognized the shifting nature of terminology. In addition, even within a given historical era, we found that different researchers used different terms and had different decision rules about who comprises the membership of identity groups. So, in the end, you will find that we have not settled on fixed terminology that is used consistently to describe identity groups. Rather, we use the language of individual researchers when reporting their studies, because we want to avoid distorting their work. We hope that you will recognize that the ever-changing language of diversity has both constructive potential to find creative ways to affirm diversity and destructive potential to dichotomize diversity into *the norm* and *the other*.

As we strive to provide a global context, we encounter current controversies about appropriate language to describe different sectors of the world. Following World War II, a distinction was made between First World, Second World, and Third World nations, with First World referring to the Western capitalist nations, Second World referring to the countries belonging to the socialist bloc led by the Soviet Union, and Third World referring to a set of countries that were primarily former colonies of the First World. More recently, many scholars have used the language of First World, Second World, and Third World to define global sectors in a slightly different way. *First World* has been used to describe the nations that were the first to industrialize, urbanize, and modernize. *Second World* has been used to describe nations that have industrialized but have not yet become central to the world economy. *Third World* has been used to refer to nonindustrialized nations that have few resources and are considered expendable in the global economy. This approach has lost favor in recent years (Leeder, 2004). Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1979) uses different language but makes a similar distinction; he refers to wealthy *core* countries, newly industrialized *semiperiphery* countries, and the poorest *periphery* countries. Other writers divide the world into *developed* and *developing* countries (McMichael, 2008), referring to the level of industrialization, urbanization, and modernization. Still others divide the world into the *Global North* and the *Global South*, calling attention to a history in which the Global North colonized and exploited the resources of the Global South. And, finally some writers talk about the *West* versus the *East*, where the distinctions are largely cultural. We recognize that such categories carry great symbolic meaning and can mask systems of power and exploitation. As with diversity, we attempted to find a respectful language that could be used consistently throughout the book. Again, we found that different researchers have used different language and different characteristics to describe categories of nations, and when reporting on their findings, we have used their own language to avoid misrepresenting their findings.

It seems, in any case, that Elder's four themes of the life course perspective can be used to more completely recognize diversity in its many forms:

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. But, the same birth cohort in different parts of the world face very different historical events. For example, the post–World War II era was very different for young adults in Japan than it was in the United States (K. Newman, 2008). And, the children of Darfur in 2010 face very different historical events from the children in Australia.

2. *Timing of lives.* Age norms change with time, place, and culture. The life course perspective, developed in late industrial affluent countries, has paid little attention to such age norms as childhood marriage in Bangladesh, but it can be extended to accommodate a more global perspective (Chowdhury, 2004). Age norms also vary by social location or place in the social structure of a given society, most notably by gender, race, ethnicity, level of education, and social class (Scherger, 2009; Settersten, 2003a). 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. Likewise, the different locations in the global economy produce very different

life course trajectories. 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, particularly personal 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. It is also important to remember that proxy agency and collective agency can produce both individual and group-based differences in life course trajectories.

A good indication of the diversity of life course trajectories is found in an often cited study by Ronald Rindfuss and colleagues (Rindfuss, Swicegood, & Rosenfeld, 1987). They examined the sequencing of five roles—work, education, homemaking, military, and other—among 6,700 U.S. men and 7,000 U.S. women for the eight 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 (Scherger, 2009; Settersten, 2003a).

These research results indicate that 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 (Settersten & 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, and it has been suggested that 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 (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998). However, the recent decline in employment stability is also leading to greater discontinuity in the life course trajectories of men (Heinz, 2003).

Life course trajectories also vary by social class. In impoverished societies, and in neighborhoods in affluent societies that are characterized by concentrated poverty, large numbers of youth drop out of school by the ninth grade (Dannefer, 2003a, 2003b; Kliman & Madsen, 2005). 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.

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 (Clark et al., 2009). The decision to immigrate may involve social, religious, or political persecution, and it increasingly involves a search for economic gain. 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 also 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 (McLeod & Almazan, 2003; O’Rand, 2009). Studies indicate that childhood events sometimes shape people’s lives 40 or 50 years later (Ferraro & Shippee, 2009). Indeed, recent biomedical research has suggested that we should look at factors that occur earlier than childhood, focusing on fetal undernutrition as a contributing factor in late life health conditions such as coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and hypertension (see Joss-Moore & Lane, 2009).

It is quite an old idea that what happens at one point in the life journey influences what happens at later points. No doubt, you have heard some version of this idea for most of your life. However, the idea of earlier life experience affecting later development has taken on new energy since the explosion of longitudinal research a few decades ago (Elder & Giele, 2009). In longitudinal research, the researchers follow a group of people over a period of time, rather than comparing different groups at one point in time. This allows them to study individual lives over time, noting the factors that influence individual life trajectories.

Two different research traditions have examined how early life experiences affect later outcomes, one based in sociology and the other based in ecological developmental psychology. The sociological tradition is interested in cumulative advantage/cumulative disadvantage. The ecological developmental tradition is interested in risk, protection, and resilience. As you can see, we are borrowing language from the ecological developmental tradition. For the most part, there has been little cross-flow of ideas between these two disciplinary traditions, but there has been some recent attempt to integrate them, as we will discuss later.

Let’s look first at research that focuses on **cumulative advantage/cumulative disadvantage**. Life course scholars have borrowed these concepts from sociologist Robert Merton to explain inequality within cohorts across the life course (Ferraro & Shippee, 2009). 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 (Ferraro & Shippee). Recently, researchers have applied the concepts of cumulative advantage/cumulative disadvantage to study racial health disparities across the life trajectory (see Shuey & Willson, 2008).

Consider the effect of advantages in schooling. Young children with affluent parents attend enriched early childhood programs and well-resourced 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.

Now, let’s look at the other research tradition. Longitudinal research has also led researchers across several disciplines to study human lives through the lens of ecological developmental risk protection. They have attempted, with much success, to identify multidimensional risk factors, or factors at one stage of development that increase the probability of developing and maintaining problem conditions at later stages. They have also been interested in individuals who have adapted successfully in the face of risk and have identified protective factors, or factors (resources) that

decrease the probability of developing and maintaining problem conditions (Fraser, 2004; Hutchison, Matto, Harrigan, Charlesworth, & Viggiani, 2007).

Recently, gerontologists in the life course tradition have tried to integrate the cumulative advantage/disadvantage and the ecological developmental risk and protection streams of inquiry. Kenneth Ferraro and Tetyana Shippee (2009) present a cumulative inequality (CI) theory. They propose that advantage and disadvantage are created across multiple levels of systems, an idea that is similar to the multidimensional aspect of the ecological risk and protection approach. They also propose that “disadvantage increases exposure to risk but advantage increases exposure to opportunity” (p. 335). They further submit that “life course trajectories are shaped by the accumulation of risk, available resources, and human agency” (p. 335).

It is important to note that neither cumulative advantage/disadvantage theory nor the ecological developmental risk and protection approach argue that early deprivations and traumas inevitably lead to a trajectory of failure. Research on cumulative advantage/disadvantage is finding that cumulative processes are reversible under some conditions, particularly when human agency is exercised, resources are mobilized, and environmental conditions open opportunities (Ferraro & Shippee, 2009; O’Rand, 2009). For example, it has been found that when resources are mobilized to create governmental safety nets for vulnerable families at key life transitions, the effects of deprivation and trauma on health are reduced (Bartley, Blane, & Montgomery, 1997).

In the ecological developmental risk and protection stream of inquiry, protective factors provide the antidote to risk factors and minimize the inevitability of a trajectory of failure. Researchers in this tradition have begun to recognize the power of humans to use protective factors to assist in a self-righting process over the life course to fare well in the face of adversity, a process known as **resilience** (Vaillant, 2002; Werner & Smith, 2001). For example, researchers have found that home nurse visitation during the first two years of a child’s life can reduce the risk of child abuse and criminal behavior among low-income mothers (Olds et al., 1997). Werner and Smith (2001) found that relationship with one supportive adult can be a strong protective factor across the life course.

The life course perspective and the concept of cumulative disadvantage are beginning to influence community epidemiology, which studies the prevalence of disease across communities (e.g., Kuh & Ben-Sholomo, 2004). 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. Exhibit 1.7 shows how phases of life are interwoven with various risks and protective factors.

## STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

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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 encourages greater attention to the impact of historical and social change on human behavior, which seems particularly important in rapidly changing global societies. 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 also finding strong evidence for the malleability of risk factors and the possibilities for preventive

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 Teenage parenthood	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

▲ **Exhibit 1.7** Risk 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 Teenage parenthood	Average/above-average intelligence Ability to distance oneself Impulse control Strong religious faith Supportive siblings Mentors
Adolescence–Adulthood	Poverty	Planning, foresight

▲ **Exhibit 1.7** (Continued)

SOURCE: Based on Werner, 2000, pp. 118–119.

interventions. With attention to the diversity in life course trajectories, the life course perspective provides a good conceptual framework for culturally sensitive 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 subsequently 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 already raising the question, what happens to the cohort effect in a cross-sectional study? This question 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. Perhaps, instead of thinking in terms of patterns, we can think in terms of processes and mechanisms. Another challenge related to diversity—perhaps a larger challenge—is that the life course perspective has not been used to consider diversity of experiences on a global level. This failure has led some scholars to suggest that the life course perspective, as it currently stands, is a perspective that only applies to affluent, late industrial societies (Dannefer, 2003a, 2003b; Fry, 2003). I would suggest, however, that there is nothing inherent in either the basic conceptions or the major themes of the life course perspective that make it inappropriate for use to understand human behavior at a global level. This is particularly true if human agency is understood to include proxy agency and collective agency.

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 (Dannefer, 2003a, 2003b;

Leisering, 2003). 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, and this remains a challenge for the future.

## 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 presented in this volume. 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 *Dimensions of Human Behavior: Person and Environment*. 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 *Person and Environment*. 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. Because the life course can be approached from the perspective of the individual or from the perspective 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 of *Dimensions of Human Behavior: Person and Environment*.

Theoretical Perspective	Life Course Themes and Concepts
<i>Systems Perspective:</i> Human behavior is the outcome of reciprocal interactions of persons operating within organized and integrated social systems.	<i>Themes:</i> Timing of Lives; Linked or Interdependent Lives <i>Concepts:</i> Biological Age, Psychological Age, Social Age, Spiritual Age
<i>Conflict Perspective:</i> Human behavior is driven by conflict, dominance, and oppression in social life.	<i>Theme:</i> Developmental Risk and Protection <i>Concepts:</i> Cumulative Advantage; Cumulative Disadvantage
<i>Rational Choice Perspective:</i> Human behavior is based on self-interest and rational choices about effective ways to accomplish goals.	<i>Theme:</i> Human Agency in Making Choices <i>Concepts:</i> Choices; Opportunities; Constraints
<i>Social Constructionist Perspective:</i> Social reality is created when actors, in social interaction, develop a common understanding of their world.	<i>Themes:</i> Timing of Lives; Diversity in Life Course Trajectories; Developmental Risk and Protection <i>Concepts:</i> Making Meaning of Life Events; Social Age; Age Norms; Age Structuring; Acculturation; Cumulative Advantage and Disadvantage

▲ **Exhibit 1.8** Overlap of the Life Course Perspective and Eight Theoretical Perspectives on Human Behavior

(Continued)

Theoretical Perspective	Life Course Themes and Concepts
<i>Psychodynamic Perspective:</i> Internal processes such as needs, drives, and emotions motivate human behavior; early childhood experiences are central to problems of living throughout life.	<i>Themes:</i> Timing of Lives; Developmental Risk and Protection <i>Concepts:</i> Psychological Age; Capacities; Skills
<i>Developmental Perspective:</i> Human behavior both changes and stays the same across the life cycle.	<i>Themes:</i> Interplay of Human Lives and Historical Times; Timing of Lives; Developmental Risk and Protection <i>Concepts:</i> Life Transitions; Biological Age, Psychological Age, Social Age, Spiritual Age; Sequencing
<i>Social Behavioral Perspective:</i> Human behavior is learned when individuals interact with the environment; human behavior is influenced by personal expectations and meanings.	<i>Themes:</i> Interplay of Human Lives and Historical Time; Human Agency in Making Choices; Diversity in Life Course Trajectories; Developmental Risk and Protection <i>Concepts:</i> Life Events; Human Agency
<i>Humanistic Perspective:</i> 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.	<i>Themes:</i> Timing of Lives; Human Agency in Making Choices <i>Concepts:</i> Spiritual Age; Meaning of Life Events and Turning Points; Individual, Family, and Community Strengths

▲ **Exhibit 1.8** (Continued)

### Critical Thinking Questions 1.2

What are the age norms for adolescence in your family system? For young adulthood? For middle adulthood? For late adulthood? Does gender play a factor in age norms in your family? How do you think the age norms in your family might affect your social work practice with families that have different age norms?

## 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.
- Recognize the ways lives are linked in the global economy.
- 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	human agency	social age
age structuring	life course perspective	social support
biological age	life event	spiritual age
cohort	population pyramid	trajectories
cohort effects	privilege	transitions
cumulative advantage	psychological age	turning point
cumulative disadvantage	resilience	
event history	sex ratio	

## 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 research team found that 99% of young adult 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 with the common risk and protective factors summarized in Exhibit 1.7?

## WEB RESOURCES

Each chapter of this textbook contains a list of Internet resources and websites that may be useful to readers 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 websites 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.

### ASK

[www.ask.com](http://www.ask.com)

### BING

[www.bing.com](http://www.bing.com)

### EXCITE

[www.excite.com](http://www.excite.com)

### GOOGLE

[www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

### LYCOS

[www.lycos.com](http://www.lycos.com)

### YAHOO

[www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)

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

#### **Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center (BLCC)**

[www.blc.cornell.edu](http://www.blc.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 websites, demography websites, and gerontology websites.

#### **The German Life History Study (GLHS)**

[www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/en/forschung/bag](http://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**

<http://lifecourse.anu.edu.au/>

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

#### **Michigan Study of Adolescent and Adult Life Transitions (MSALT)**

[www.rcgd.isr.umich.edu/msalt/home.htm](http://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.

#### **Project Resilience**

[www.projectresilience.com](http://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.

#### **Twin Study at University of Helsinki**

[www.twinstudy.helsinki.fi/](http://www.twinstudy.helsinki.fi/)

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.