This graduate-level course is designed as the core introductory course for the Sociology of the Life Course area in the Department of Sociology graduate program. The course introduces students to the theories, methods, and substantive topics which exemplify the life course paradigm. The life course paradigm is based on four themes: (1) human lives are embedded in and shaped by historical context; (2) individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take, within the constraints of historical and social circumstances; (3) life domains, including work, family, and social background are intertwined; and (4) the developmental impact of a life transition is contingent on when it occurs in a person’s life.

Life course research is interdisciplinary by nature and design. Studies of the life course typically incorporate sociology, history, psychology, and demography, and often tackle the complex debate over constancy and change in human development. With respect to substantive areas, the focus of life course studies ranges from social psychological outcomes such as stress, self-esteem, occupational values and cognitive complexity, to family development, marital and fertility patterns, educational and occupational attainment, retirement, and deviance.

A single semester can provide only a sampling of the current range of theory and empirical work on the life course. The most important objective is to acquire a way of thinking which can offer a point of departure in research. Students are expected and encouraged to attend the Sociology of the Life Course research seminar (SOC 745), led by Duane Alwin on Thursday afternoons.

**Prerequisites:**
Graduate standing or permission of the instructor is required. Some familiarity with quantitative research methods is also highly recommended. A handout distributed on the first day of class provides a basic review of statistical methodologies; students with limited backgrounds in statistics should familiarize themselves with this information.

**Required Reading:**

A course pack of journal articles and book chapters.
Recommended Readings:
Recommended articles and books may enrich your knowledge of the life course paradigm. For the most part, recommended articles are either reference/background sources, or recent controversial works in the area of life course studies. Recommended books are recent classics in the field of life course studies. It is not expected that students will read the recommended books during the semester; rather, these books are suggested for future reference and prelim preparation. All recommended books are on reserve at the Undergraduate Library.

Overview of Course Requirements and Grading:
This course will blend both lecture and class discussion. The first hour of class will provide an introductory lecture and overview of the week’s readings. The remaining two hours will be dedicated to in-depth discussion of the week’s readings, as well as discussion of questions and articles that students introduce. Each week, each student is responsible for bringing to class: (1) two questions, in writing, based on the week’s readings; and (2) a brief (one page) summary of an article which is NOT listed on the course syllabus but which is relevant both to the week’s topic and to the student’s own research interests. The class as a whole will benefit from the specialized information and suggested readings brought in by each participant. In order to facilitate discussion, each week a different student will act as discussion leader/moderator. The discussion leader should receive via email a copy of each class participant’s questions NO LATER than 5 p.m. on the Tuesday prior to each Wednesday class.

Course grades will be based on four major requirements. (1) Leading a discussion section. Each week, a student or pair of students will be responsible for leading discussion. The student leader may base the discussion on the questions submitted by class participants, or may design a discussion which incorporates both assigned readings and his/her own research interests [10 percent of class grade]. (2) Participation in weekly discussion. Preparation and active participation in class is expected of all students. One’s participation grade reflects actual participation in discussion, the quality of the questions brought to class, and the individual article summaries brought to class each week [15 percent of class grade]. (3) Midterm Exam. Students will be given a choice of essay questions to answer; the questions will be similar in scope to those typically included on preliminary exams. Four questions will be distributed one week prior to the essay due date, and students must write answers to three of the questions. Each answer should be roughly 3-4 pages long. The take-home exam will be distributed on March 8 and is due on March 15 [35 percent of class grade]. (4) Final exam or critical literature review. Students have the option of either (a) completing a take-home final exam, or (b) writing a 15-20 page critical literature review. The final exam will be similar in scope to the midterm exam. Questions will be distributed on April 5; final answers on due on April 19.

The paper should provide a critical review of literature on a topic chosen by the student, in consultation with the instructor. The topic should be relevant to the sociology of the life course, yet should also be sufficiently specific so that it may provide the basis for a front end of a dissertation prospectus or empirical research paper. A brief (2-3 page) description of your paper topic is due on February 16. Those students opting to write the paper will present a brief synopsis of their work during the final class session. Final papers are due on April 26. [40 percent of class grade]. Incompletes will not be given in the course.
READING SCHEDULE

I. Introduction to the Life Course Paradigm

January 5: Welcome and Overview of Course

January 12: Introduction to the Life Course Paradigm: Themes and Critiques

Required:

Recommended Articles:

Recommended Books:
January 19: Introduction to Life Course Studies: Methods and Models

Required:

Recommended Articles:

II. Paradigmatic Themes

A. Lives in Historical Time and Place

January 26: The Influence of Birth Cohort and Historical Context

Required:
Elder, Glen H., Jr., 1974. Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Ch. 1 The Depression Experience (pp. 3-24), Ch. 2 Adaptations to Economic Deprivation (pp. 24-40), Ch. 9 Personality in Adult Experience (pp. 240-268).

Recommended Articles:

Recommended Books:

B. Human Agency and Structural Constraints

February 2: Agency and Planful Behavior

Required:
Recommended Articles:

Recommended Books:

February 9: Constraints to Human Agency

Required:
Bowles, Samuel and Herbert Gintis. 1976. Schooling in Capitalist America. New York: Basic Books. Ch. 1 Beyond the Educational Frontier: The Great American Dream Freeze, (pp. 3-17) Ch. 2 Broken Promises: School Reform in Retrospect (pp. 18-49), and Ch. 5 Education and Personal Development: The Long Shadow of Work (pp. 125-148).
MacLeod, Jay. 1995. Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood. New York: Westview Press. Ch 1. Social Immobility in the Land of Opportunity (pp. 3-10); Ch. 2. Social Reproduction in Theoretical Perspective. (Pp. 11-24); Ch. 5. The World of Work: Aspirations of the Hangers and the Brothers (pp. 61-82), and Ch. 7. Leveled Aspirations: Social Reproduction Takes its Toll (pp. 112-134).

Recommended Articles:


Recommended Books:

C. Linked Lives

February 16: Intergenerational Transmission of Attitudes and Behaviors

Required:

Recommended Articles:
Recommended Books:

February 23: Short- and Long-Term Effects of Family Structure and Resources

Required:

Recommended Articles:

Recommended Books:
D. Timing, Transitions and Trajectories

March 8: The Meaning of Transitions, Trajectories and Turning Points

Required:

Recommended Articles:

Recommended Books:

March 15: Transition to Adulthood

Required:
Recommended Articles:

Recommended Books:

March 22: Non-Normative and Off-Time Transitions and Trajectories in Young Adulthood

Required:
Recommended Articles:

Recommended Books:

March 29: Worklife Transitions and Trajectories

Required:

Recommended Articles:
Recommended Books:

**April 5: Family Transitions in Adulthood**

**Required:**

**Recommended Articles:**

**Recommended Books:**

**April 12: Student paper presentations**