

LIVES Impact



The life-course perspective in social policy Why and how it could be useful

Key messages

The life-course perspective can:

- set the guiding principles for social and public policies aimed at individuals and social groups who are vulnerable to long-term and cumulative effects of critical life events and situations
- sustain the claim for support structures to help people's ability to navigate responsibly through difficult life situations using coping mechanisms drawn from developmental psychology
- offer access to most advanced methods in social science to assess over time social developments and welfare schemes and so measure the need for intervention and improvement

Summary

While conventional social policies amount to an assorted mix of interventions "from the cradle to the grave", the life-course perspective suggests an action framework for policy-making that recognizes the connections across all stages and domains in life. It views human development in a holistic way, physically and psychologically linking individuals to the

social, cultural and historical context. Specifically, it looks into critical life events and situations and their impact over time and cumulatively on individuals, families and social groups. The life-course perspective thus blazes the trail for new and innovative research in social science and psychology on issues such as social inequality, poverty, unemployment, discrimination, burn-out, physical and mental health, school-to-work transitions, ageing, parenthood, divorce or the loss of family members.

In so doing, it generates research-based knowledge and evidence aimed at informing public debate and decision makers, public administrators, teachers and educators and professionals in community associations and NGOs working in the field of social policy and related areas. Moreover, while setting the stage for social innovation, the life-course perspective also offers access to advanced research tools and methods to assess and evaluate long-term social developments and public initiatives, using large longitudinal data based on repeated surveys, thus providing a particularly strong measure to identify potential for improvement and, ultimately, reduced welfare needs and cost.

Social Innovation through Life Course Research

At the most basic level most critical life events and situations have an impact on people and social groups over time. Take the example of schooling: it provides skills and competencies without which later in life individuals may encounter difficulties on the labour market or in interpersonal relations. Or take the example of a parent's loss of a child: while most immediately this may lead to depression and be detrimental to one's employment, in the long run the loss of a child may deprive the parent when frail and elderly of a source of emotional, physical and financial support.

Policies informed by the life-course perspective draw on insights gained in psychology and the social sciences for the study of such long-term impacts and the paths that lead to their occurrence. In contrast to looking at what happened, life course research focuses on the dynamic interplay of changes and continuities across multiple life domains, examining data across time and searching for links, frequencies, clusters and patterns. It relies on repeated surveys and uses advanced statistical models to analyze individual pathways in terms of education, work, residence, personal relationships, family status, health, welfare needs, employment, income or a combination thereof.

By taking the long view, a life course analysis can detect cohort effects, a typical sequence of events associated with personal hardships, a collection of factors that over time has the potential to cause harm, gate keepers and facilitators that impede or allow individuals and social groups to move in and out of employment or education, or a set of behaviours and traits which deviates from the most common pathways. Given its scope and the wealth of insights that can be gained, life course research may therefore serve as a powerful tool to assess, develop and innovate policy, identify gaps, pre-empt welfare needs, optimize existing schemes and generate new policies.

Vulnerability and Social Security

Welfare systems generally cover risks only once they have materialized. Considered from the life-course perspective, such risk-based welfare regimes primarily lend support to manifest vulnerabilities, whereas latent forms fall through, generally to the detriment of the individual (who suffers) and society (which has to make funds available for welfare schemes). It is as if orange on the traffic lights signals no warning and only red signals entitlement to assistance. By focusing on both manifest and latent vulnerabilities and making available psychological and social resources through facilities or cash payments, the life-course perspective steers welfare systems towards reference points which

favour prevention and the use of compensation or coping mechanisms as put forth in developmental psychology and its emphasis on the dynamics of loss and gain across interdependent life spheres and life dimensions.

Life course research draws attention to the dynamic nature of risks. Across time risks change, gain in importance and intensity or worsen in combination with other risks, thus corresponding to a time period during which individuals and social groups are vulnerable but not necessarily eligible for welfare support. Certain vulnerabilities (e.g. illiteracy) may be invisible for years until a critical event or situation (e.g. job loss as a result of a recession or structural change) leads to a long-lasting dependency (e.g. welfare benefits) with damaging effects on the individual and society. Yet, in accordance with the life course perspective, recognizing vulnerabilities through adequate means (e.g. continued education) can pre-empt welfare needs and the accumulation of disadvantages. Similarly, certain vulnerabilities (e.g. social marginalization) are an obstacle for young adults to enter the labour market and can, for example, be overcome by strengthening resolve in one life domain (e.g. employment) whilst increasing psychosocial resources in another life domain (e.g. group ties).

Longer Transitions and Longer Lives

In the past decades, life expectancy and the timing and duration of transitions such as school-to-work, adult-to-parenthood or retirement-to-death have significantly changed. Compulsory schooling no longer paves the way to the factory floor and instead leads to a wide array of "intermediary solutions", internships or schools. Similarly, in Switzerland motherhood is increasingly associated with full or part-time work, while men only just start to reduce their hours with fatherhood. Furthermore, the dramatic increase in average life expectancy has led to ageing societies and has completely changed the meaning of retirement since the onset of pension plans.

These profound social and demographic changes call for a renewal of social-policy making. Viewed from the life-course perspective, social and public policies must increasingly take into account long-term consequences for increasingly longer lives and life transitions. One might consider leisure activities during working life to be associated to mental health in old age. Or: ask whether sabbaticals might be a source of welfare to care for one's ageing parents when considering costly palliative care services. Similarly, one might consider the promotion of uninterrupted employment throughout adulthood in view, for example, of post-divorced single mothers who have been out of the labour market for extended periods and thus are hovering

just above minimum subsistence level with rather gloomy retirement prospects due to underfunded pension plans? For these kinds of questions, life-course research can offer research-based knowledge and so inform policy making with evidence for the development of public programmes sensitive to demographic changes and innovative initiatives such as life-course savings plans, care-time banks or novel forms of work organization and support for parenthood. ■

PASCAL MAEDER, Knowledge transfer Officer, LIVES Centre, University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Western Switzerland

Suggested Further Readings:

Sapin, M., Spini, D., Widmer, E.. (2014). Les parcours de vie. De l'adolescence au grand âge. Le savoir suisse (2nd éd.). Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes.

Sapin, M., Spini, D., Widmer, E.. (2010). I percorsi di vita. Dall'adolescenza alla vecchiaia. Bologna - Italia: Il Mulino

Settersten, R.A., Jr. (ed.). (2003). Invitation to the Life Course: Toward New Understandings of Later Life. Amityville: Baywood

Naegele, G. (ed.). (2010). Soziale Lebenslaufpolitik. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften

LIVES Impact (ISSN: 2297-6124) publie régulièrement des notes sur des résultats de recherche pertinents pour les politiques publiques et sociales issus d'études menées au Centre LIVES. Elles sont publiées en trois langues (français, allemand et anglais) et envoyées aux personnes décideuses de l'administration publique, du monde politique et des organisations non gouvernementales.

Face à la crise sanitaire du COVID-19, LIVES Impact lance des numéros spéciaux qui visent à mettre en relief des recommandations pratiques et des analyses utiles à l'intention des responsables des politiques publiques et sociales, tant du point de vue du parcours de vie que, de manière plus générale, des sciences comportementales et sociales.

Comité éditorial: Pascal Maeder, HES-SO & Centre LIVES (pascal.maeder@hes-so.ch)

Archives: www.centre-lives.ch/impact

Centre LIVES, Université de Lausanne, Bâtiment Géopolis, CH-1015 Lausanne, www.centre-lives.ch, T +41 21 692 38 71, ktt@lives-nccr.ch