

Longitudinal and Life Course Studies Journal: its purpose and scope

The purpose of the journal is to provide a platform for life course study by which we mean holistic understanding of human development through analysis of the interactions between processes of development in different life domains, and at different ecological levels (macro, meso, micro) taking account of the historical, socio-economic socio-biological context at all stages of the life course. Study of these processes helps to identify the 'critical/sensitive periods', 'turning points' and 'exposures to risk' through which the trajectories and transitions that make up the changing life course occur. The interdisciplinary or more broadly, cross disciplinary stances implied, promote synthesis across the traditional boundaries between the social, behavioural and health science disciplines. Underpinning the enterprise is methodology originating in measurement and statistics, sometimes discipline based, but more often generic, adapted to address the research questions that the line of enquiry demands.

Although the approach is inclusive, seeking solutions to research problems in whatever disciplinary framework they are embedded, inevitably there are different styles of research and different theoretical emphases, historically determined, that characterise the scope of measurement techniques deployed and the forms of analysis undertaken. Thus in the spectrum of approaches the individual differences and neuro-physiological foundations of psychological explanation and population dynamics of epidemiology give way to the explanatory frameworks of structural-functionalism, culturalism and symbolic interactionism in sociology or the rational action principles of economics. Complicating matters further, different terminology may be used to describe what appears ostensibly to be empirically the same concept and at other times the same terminology may be used to describe what is empirically quite different. For example, A term from economics such as 'capital' may be transformed into 'resource' in psychology or extended to concepts such as 'social', 'emotional' or 'identity' 'capital' in other social science disciplines, where the disciplinary basis of the term, tied to ideas of 'investment' and exchange, tends to disappear.

We welcome contributions across the whole spectrum but within the integrative framework that the Life Course perspective provides. We also seek to ensure that all research reporting is accessible to the journal's multi-disciplinary readership.

In establishing the Journal we recognised that the variation in styles of research becomes particularly important in relation to reviewing research papers for publication because the expertise brought to bear must be adequate to understand the style of research as defined by the theoretical foci and methodological stance of the research reported. Accordingly, while retaining our overarching goal of holistic understanding, we decided to organise peer review in terms of four broad areas: Health Sciences (including a recent sub-division devoted to early life and child health); Behavioural Sciences and Development; Social and Economic Sciences; Methodology and Statistical Sciences. The paragraphs following offer guidance in each of these areas on what papers, broadly identified with the style of research falling within them, might be expected to encompass. Again such division of reviewing interests should not be seen as a rigid demarcation, but merely helpful guidance to enable authors to anticipate the kinds of substantive and methodological issues that reviewers working broadly within them are likely to raise.

Health Sciences

This section encompasses research on population physical and mental health and illness outcomes at all ages, and influences on pathways to those outcomes. Hence the coverage includes epidemiological research that uses longitudinal and life course data concerned with health at all stages of the life course. The outcomes may include trajectories, for example of development, growth or ageing, as well as events. Influences may include experience or exposure occurring at earlier times, either in terms of generations or, for individuals, from the fetal period onwards. Experience and exposure is broadly defined to include, from a biological base, physical and mental development, behaviour, health and health-related behaviour, personality, and socioeconomic and physical environmental effects. Interest extends further to genetic effects, gene-environment interaction and epigenetics in population health. We welcome reports of research on inter-cohort and inter-generational comparisons, of methodological work on any aspect of longitudinal research on health, from data collection to analysis and archiving, and reports on the status, progress and availability of studies and sources of longitudinal and life course data that include health.

Behavioural Sciences and Development

At times, 'developmental' research has been thought of as synonymous with the study of children's development, with studies of development in childhood and adolescence. We are delighted to publish papers that focus on these early developmental periods. But we interpret the concept of development in a much broader way seeing development as continuing throughout the life course and highlighting the influences that prompt or inhibit development. Increasing numbers of longitudinal studies now have data that trace participants from the earliest stages of development, tracking the changes that occur well into the adult years. Results from such studies have proved hugely influential, highlighting both continuities and discontinuities in development, and underscoring the cumulative and interacting influence of early conditions and experiences on development much later in life. Although psychological perspectives lie at the heart of much behavioural research, many of the most exciting new developments stem from collaborations involving other perspectives such as those from sociology, economics, geography, social ecology, genetics, physiology and epidemiology. Such interdisciplinary work within a life course research framework is enabling ever-richer explorations of the ways in which proximal and more distal environmental influences, and biology, interweave to affect development. The effect of change in the social and physical environment on the processes involved is another area of innovative investigation on which we welcome reports.

Social and Economic Sciences

We contend that the individual life course starts in the family of origin and develops through a series of events and decisions with regard to education, family and jobs. In recent decades we have witnessed large changes in these respects. Women have become more active in the labour market, young people opt for more education but have recently met with difficulties in getting jobs, and partnerships are more easily formed and more often dissolved than before. We are interested in receiving papers addressing questions about the life trajectories that people typically experience today and how, more precisely, life courses have changed in the post-war period. Which individual outcomes, in terms of class positions, health, economic conditions, and family circumstances, do different trajectories lead to?

How has does societal change influenced individual life chances and how is individual action structured by societal institutions – family, school, labour market, work organisations, welfare state? How are the choices people make influenced, and sometimes constrained, by class position and by gender? Two related processes influence social change: the aggregation of individual life trajectories; the succession of generations. A change in people's living and working conditions and scope for action will affect their behaviour and this will modify the institutions, whereby the change may become reinforced. These changes may turn out to be even more critical for the individual when family membership becomes more volatile and single-parent families become more common. Hence family dynamics is an important mediator and re-enforcer of change effects. We welcome contributions from research addressing these and related issues.

Statistical Sciences and Methodology

The analysis of longitudinal data on individuals is a rapidly expanding field that faces some important issues that may require more complex forms of analysis than many cross-sectional datasets and between them define the scope of the section's interests. The first set of issues arise from the fact that repeat measurements, as in growth studies are made on individuals, so we need to apply appropriate statistical models recognising the 'hierarchical structure' of such data. In other contexts we may be measuring 'time to an event', as in event history analysis or survival analysis. An alternative approach is to treat time as a number of fixed 'occasions' or 'sweeps' formulating a series of conditional analyses where variables at later occasions form responses with earlier occasion variables as predictors. Or we might be seeking to identify common patterns in transition data as in sequence analysis using 'optimal matching' methods. The second set of issues arises from the problem of 'attrition', where individuals selectively become missing, possibly to return, and where in particular the propensity to be missing cannot be assumed random. Where dropout or attrition occurs, weighting and/or imputation methods will be used to 'correct' the data. Dealing with measurement errors and the potential biases they can produce, may similarly involve sophisticated procedures such as structural equation modelling with latent variables. We welcome papers reporting the use of such procedures, where appropriate, but because of the journal's general readership, their description and interpretation needs to avoid technical exposition as far possible as possible, as well as in the justification for their use. We also welcome papers that seek to introduce novel methodology in this area, possibly used elsewhere, and which may not be familiar to readers of the journal.